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A CASE STUDY THAT EXAMINES THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP
AT NINTH GRADE ACADEMIES

by

Alvin Earl Harris, Jr.

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Leadership and Policy Studies

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family for being so supportive and encouraging during this entire process. More particularly, this is dedicated to my mother and father for instilling the importance of hard work and higher education in me. I would also like to express a special feeling of gratitude to my wife, Concetta. Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my friends and church family who have supported me throughout the process.

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ABSTRACT

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While there is a sizeable amount of data available documenting a drop-out problem nationally in public high schools, there have been many reforms instituted to rectify this situation (National Research Council, 2003). Mia and Wheelock (2005) found that the grade level that is impacted most by these occurrences is the ninth grade. Gewertz (2007) commented that of all high school students ninth graders compose the largest subgroup who quit school each year. A study of high school drop-outs conducted by Allensworth and Easton in 2007 reported that many of these individuals had failed 25% of their required classes during their freshmen year. In an effort to resolve this problem, there has been a movement in many school districts across this country to utilize ninth grade academies (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

This qualitative study used three different data collection methods: two observations, three interviews, and one focus study group. The findings revealed four themes that resonated from these data collection methodologies. These themes are: the collective experiences of an individual as opposed to a monolithic experience which led them to become instructional leaders of a ninth grade academy. The catalyst for the creation of a ninth grade academy was site-based decision-making as opposed to centralized decision-making. Ninth grade academies can be structured in two ways: the seclusion concept or a school-within-a school model. Leaders of ninth grade academies are either introverted or extroverted.

This inquiry project is essential to the field of educational leadership because it incorporates existing data about ninth grade academies as the foundational layer. In addition to this, it captured existing data pertaining to drop-outs at the ninth grade and illuminated the processes, procedures, and best practices utilized by instructional leaders at ninth grade academies in their continuous effort to resolve this problem. This collective case study examined two instructional leaders at two different ninth grade academies and their implementation of processes, procedures, and best practices to mitigate the drop-out phenomenon at this grade level.

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Chapter 1

Background of Study

In a world where information is instantly at one's fingertips, it is a poor indictment of the public education system in America for students to attend high schools where "graduation was a 50/50 chance" (Wilson, 2004, p.70). The magnitude of this problem is crystallized when one has been equipped with the knowledge that at the current rate, if this situation was not rectified, "one out of every seven children born in the United States today will not graduate" from high school (Mizelle, 2005, p. 56). Further adding to this dismal picture was the fact that each year, the number of students who entered the ninth grade will not graduate from their respective schools in four or even five years from their start date (Wheelock, 1993).

This epidemic was succinctly stated in the research conducted by a Pittsburgh school district which indicated that if students were going to quit school they were more prone to do so between the eighth and ninth grades (Gewertz, 2007). Additional probing into this situation has disclosed that nationally the number of freshmen who were retained one or more times in the ninth grade was on the rise. According to the findings from a study of 450 students conducted by Hertzog of Pennsylvania's Slippery Rock University and Morgan from State University of West Georgia, (2001), one-fourth of students who failed the ninth grade, never graduated from high school. It was at the ninth grade where high school students, who had not been successful academically, were kept in a literal holding cell until either they decide to drop-out of school or they were forced out (Reents, 2002). However, when examining the phenomena of ninth grade failures one

immediately encountered the obvious that these students were not prepared to make the adjustment to high school.

The work of Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), identified some of the obstacles that were inhibitors for students nationally: the massive size of most comprehensive high school campuses, large student body populations, the faster pace of the high school daily schedule, more classes and teachers, self-absorbed and unfriendly older students, and teachers' indifference and their impersonal atmosphere which were in stark contrast to the students' middle school experiences. These predictors, coupled with freshmen's inability to study effectively, manage their time effectively, and the fact that there were more societal distractions, combined to accelerate ninth graders' academic doom (Floriello, 2008).

Moreover, these factors, along with the large student body and the physical size of most traditional comprehensive high schools, gave rise to the need for ninth grade academies in this country. Others suggested that due to the specific issues that ninth graders endured, they should be allowed to spend a year together to develop educationally and socially (Chmelynski, 2004). Haviland (2005) indicated that the barriers that impeded students from graduating from high school had to be addressed at the ninth grade level or else graduation was an insurmountable challenge. As a result of these aforementioned difficulties, there were other schools of thought that suggested that if ninth grade students were to be successful they must be involved in a year-long transition program that was inclusive of all stakeholders (Smith, 2007).

Moreover, when considering why students who were once vibrant pupils became disengaged at the ninth grade, many factors were exposed. There was a movement in

many school districts across this country to utilized ninth grade academies to resolve this problem. Black (2004) showed that when ninth grade students believed that teachers do not care about them, it was much easier for them to disengage from the educational process altogether.

Problem Statement

Twenty-five percent of the children who failed their ninth grade year never graduated from high school (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). Over the last 30 years in this country, student drop-out became a significant problem (Wheelock, 1993). As a result of this growing trend, school districts have unsuccessfully attempted to remedy this situation with a myriad of silver-bullet quick-fix approaches. However, one research-based strategy that has been adopted as a remedy was the ninth grade academy concept.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the lived experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies and examine the processes and procedures that were utilized to eradicate the growing phenomena of freshmen dropping out of school. Since the existing literature did not address the experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies, there was no information highlighting the processes and procedures that instructional leaders implemented at such academies to facilitate students remaining in school and successfully matriculating through the ninth grade.

This narrative utilized instructional leaders from multiple sites in this case study, the researcher attempted to better comprehend their roles at ninth grade academies and the ways this concept was implemented to rectify the problem of “student drop-out” in public education. Once instructional leaders have obtained an understanding about how ninth grade academies increased promotion rate at this grade level, solutions can be

developed and employed to curtail this escalating phenomenon. Instructional leaders, teachers, parents, and all educational stakeholders can utilize the freshman academy model with tested best practices and procedures that are vital in children successfully completing the ninth grade, thus increasing their likelihood of graduating from high school.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to explore the lived experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies and examine the processes and procedures that were utilized to eradicate the growing phenomena of freshmen dropping out of school. Since the existing literature did not address the experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies, there was no information highlighting the processes and procedures that instructional leaders implemented at such academies to facilitate students remaining in school and successfully matriculating through the ninth grade.

This qualitative study was conducted to answer one baseline question, which was supported by four sub questions. The over arching research question that guided this project was, “What are the experiences of two instructional leaders in implementing a ninth grade academy?” Three data collection methods (i.e., observations, interviews, and focus groups) were employed to answer the research question. The sub-questions developed essentially to facilitate resolutions to the over-arching question, were:

1. What were the experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies, and how did these leaders make meaning of these experiences?
2. What was the nature of instructional leadership at ninth grade academies?
3. What best practices, policies, and procedures did you (the instructional leader)

implement at your ninth grade academy that impacted the small learning community model?

4. Describe the leadership attributes you possess that were instrumental in incorporating all stakeholders in the implementation of the ninth grade academy. What was the response of different stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teacher teams) to this implementation?

Significance of Study

The body of knowledge pertaining to the impact that ninth grade academies had on curtailing student drop-out was limited. Moreover, there were few empirical studies that focused on the impact of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies in any extent. This researcher was unable to find any studies to date that analyzed the use of ninth grade academies coupled with the shared experiences of instructional leaders at such institutions. Many school districts adopted the ninth grade academy concept as a potential solution to the drop-out crisis at the freshman level. This study was instrumental to the educational community because it examined the significance of instructional leaders in the most pivotal year of a student's pursuit toward high school graduation—ninth grade. Therefore, the current study filled a void in the literature by exploring data that were currently available on ninth grade academies and ninth grade student drop-out, while simultaneously compiling new information about the shared experience of instructional leadership at these institutions of learning. With this study, I chronicled the experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies.

Methodology

In the current study, which was qualitative in nature, a case study methodology was employed to aid comprehension of the phenomena of instructional leadership within ninth grade academies. Observations, interviews, and focus group sessions were used to collect data from the instructional leaders chosen for the study. After notes from data collection were transcribed, these transcriptions were analyzed to detect codes and divide information into categories. After data analysis, several themes were developed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was the “social constructivism” perspective. Creswell (2007) defined social constructivism as the desire of “participants to understand the world in which they lived, worked, and played” (p. 20). Creswell stated that the researcher was dependent upon the participants’ perspectives of the studied situation and that their understanding or realities were oftentimes shaped by the person’s social environment.

Proponents of this ideology contended that information retrieved from a constructivist point of view was neither significant nor null—it was understood from the social context from which it was derived. Some social scientists asserted that “truth” should only be recognized after it was achieved by a “consensus of informed and sophisticated constructors” (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, pp. 44–45). Social constructivists believed that people were interested in constructing knowledge about the world in which they lived. Patton (2002) stipulated that one’s culture was the predetermining factor in shaping his or her reality (it crafted one’s perspective about their world view and how they felt about things.) According to Kolar (2002), the leading scholar of this movement

was Leo Vygotsky, who advocated that individuals were able to obtain knowledge through experiences. I comprehended a better understanding of the role of an instructional leader at a ninth grade academy from individuals who were currently and actively “living” this phenomenon.

Paradigmatic Assumptions

When conducting naturalistic inquiry, there were four essential truths that every researcher must comprehend: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and rhetoric. When conducting field work, a researcher must understand the subject’s perception of reality (epistemology) and know the subject’s meaning of knowledge (ontology). Also during this inquiry process, a researcher must acknowledge their own subjectivities (axiology) to the topic being studied and the impact that these biases had on the manuscript’s preparation and writing process. The final assumption (rhetorical) required that the subject being studied was given a “voice” and that their perspectives were reflected in a descriptive manner. In the current study, I contended that by being transparent, forthright, and honest regarding assumptions and biases relating to this research project, the reader was afforded the opportunity to interpret the data for themselves because they knew how and why the research were shaped the way it was.

Ontological. This philosophical assumption attempted to capture the nature of a person’s reality, derived from several social encounters. I, as the researcher, believed that realities were numerous and determined by a person’s lived experiences. Creswell (2007) defined ontology as what an individual believed to be true about a situation that was developed by their perspective, which was often multiple. In the current study, the participants’ realities were crafted by years of experience in education, specifically in a

high school setting. The study illuminated experiences (both past and present) that were influenced by the instructional leaders' realities and were instrumental in impacting student achievement. This assumption dealt with the manner in which an individual understood or believed their reality. Other factors that contributed to these instructional leaders' realities were their environmental, social, and economic backgrounds. As a result, their realities were shaped by their experiences from historical circumstances.

Epistemological. It was the construct wherein individuals created their own meanings based on their interactions with the world. Moreover, these instructional leaders have developed their own interpretations of effectively leading ninth grade academies, with their lived experiences in education as a foundation. Stated more simply, this school of thought dealt with the concept of how knowledge was obtained. For this particular body of research, the knowledge was garnered through years of experience in education, daily personal interactions, and the trial and error process. I believed that new knowledge was developed through an individual's lived experiences in the world in which they existed. This inquiry constructed new knowledge regarding being an instructional leader at a ninth grade academy. I also asserted that dialogue and interaction with the study participants in their natural settings was essential to amassing new knowledge.

Creswell (2007) identified epistemology as a philosophical assumption wherein the researcher desired close proximity to the subject being studied over a considerable length of time in efforts to develop a more detailed comprehension of what was known. Qualitative researchers typically devoted extensive amounts of time to studying their subjects to learn first-hand what the participants know about the topic. However, due to

the instructional leaders' time constraints I utilized the time spent with the research participants to obtain a thorough understanding of the world in which they worked.

Axiological. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative researchers brought their values, opinions, and biases to the inquiry process. For qualitative inquiry to provide an accurate assessment of a subject, the investigator must acknowledge that the research was value-laden and disclose his personal values and biases that were influential in shaping the research paradigm. I acknowledged the fact that data were impacted by my personal values and belief system. As a result, the research design and implementation were developed in a nature that was persuaded by this sphere of influence. As the researcher, I admitted my belief that instructional leaders were ultimately responsible for setting the climate in the building. I believed explicitly that leaders should create an environment where students were nurtured and loved. By doing this, children, especially ninth graders, were positively impacted. Furthermore, I asserted my belief that there was a greater propensity for student achievement in smaller learning communities, like ninth grade academies.

Rhetorical. Creswell (2007) stated that rhetorical assumption has consistently evolved with the frequency of qualitative research being utilized as an inquiry tool over the course of time. Notwithstanding, researchers employing this approach have become more descriptive and narrative in their writing styles. Since this was a qualitative study, the participants' voices were important; their perspectives were highlighted throughout this study (in third person). I also employed the use of the first-person pronoun "I" in writing this narrative. A writing style that illuminated the experiences of the researched participants accurately, thoroughly, and descriptively was used.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were particularly germane to this study and guide its conceptualization and research practice.

Small learning communities: The concept of children learning best in small, close-knit groups. It encouraged “teaming” (defined later) of teachers and developing common assessment time for them in efforts to establish curriculum that was most beneficial to the student (David, 2008).

Case study: In-depth analysis that focused on a program, event, or individual engaged in a particular activity based on thorough data collection (Creswell, 2005).

Collective case study: A qualitative research method in which a researcher utilized more than one case simultaneously to better comprehend the situation that was studied. This methodology was sometimes referred to as multiple-site case study (Creswell, 2005).

Teaming: Combining teachers who worked together to educate a few hundred students for a school year. These teachers worked across disciplines to develop instructional strategies that were most conducive for a diverse student population (Clark, 1997).

Ninth grade academy: A small learning community that was an autonomous “school-within-a-school” and was part of the high school reform design implemented to eradicate the freshman student drop-out epidemic. It was designed to provide students with the strategies and support services that were essential for them to make successful transitions to high school. Students were taught by a team of teachers who were committed to working only with ninth grade students. Some of these academies were

located within larger high schools, some were created in separate locations, and others were secluded in their existing high schools on separate wings or floors (Wilder, Murphee, & Dutton, 2009).

Instructional leader: The person in an educational environment who was singularly most responsible for all educational activities at a school (usually the principal). The activities that the instructional leader engaged in or assigned to others revolved around students' achievement (Flath, 1989).

Student engagement: The philosophy of developing lessons and instructions that kept students focused on mastering the materials and concepts taught. It was also the concept of having students bond with the school environment to achieve a sense of belonging (Chapman, 2003).

Student disengagement: The negative process (e.g., habitually missing school, having disciplinary problems at school, student alienation from classmates, students not participating in school-related activities or functions) that students engaged in that became the catalyst for them ultimately quitting school (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004).

Parental involvement: Collaboration between parents and schools to nurture and support students. It also referred to a school's efforts to keep parents informed about students' progress or lack of achievement. It was also seen as a school's attempt to keep parents as active participants in their children's education (Cotton, 2001).

Qualitative research: Naturalistic inquiry that attempted to comprehend the ways individuals understood the world in which they lived. This was an inductive study in

which a researcher was ultimately responsible for collecting data for the purpose of producing a rich description of the proposed topic (Patton, 2002).

Gatekeeper: The person in a school or school district who was responsible for protecting the school community (Maxwell, 2005).

Drop-out: A student who did not formally withdraw from school but was removed from the school's roll for non-attendance. This category included students who were mandated to attend school due to compulsory attendance (age requirement) but who stopped attending school, had not given a legitimate legal reason for leaving, and cannot be located (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

Chapter Summary

Essentially, this chapter established the fundamental outline for this research inquiry, provided a background about a national epidemic; high school drop-outs at the ninth grade level. The ninth grade academy concept was developed as a means to resolve this national epidemic. Hertzog (2001) reported that a fourth of all ninth graders who failed never received a high school diploma or an equivalent certificate.

This study was written from a social constructivism perspective, and there was one primary research question and four sub questions. This chapter concluded with reasons why this topic should be studied; the research void filled by the current study was also addressed. Key terms pertaining to ninth grade academies were also listed.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 presented a general background of ninth grade academies, along with an identifiable research problem. Research questions guiding the study were discussed, as

well as terms and definitions used in this project. The importance of the study was also stated in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 covered historical issues pertaining to high school drop-out in public schools in America. I outlined how the problem of student drop-out had reached epidemic proportions in public schools and gave reasons why individuals quit school. I explained why the ninth grade academy was a viable solution to this national crisis. Significant emphasis was placed on the impact of ninth grade academies on students' achievement and its correlation to the drop-out problem.

The methodology employed in the current study was explained in Chapter 3. A detailed description of each data collection method and specific analysis about how to perform each technique was included. Participant and site selection criteria were illuminated. Chapter 4 contained the study's findings and captured the voices of the researched participants. Finally, Chapter 5 contained several recommendations for future research that resonated from the data. I elaborated on implications as it related to future research projects.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter was divided into three components: (1) The foundation of the high school reform movement in public education in the United States and how these efforts have attempted to correct the problem of high school drop-outs was given; (2) A detailed analysis of the historical rationale for ninth grade academies in high schools, followed by the justification that educators have given for the implementation of these small learning communities; and (3) Obstacles and advantages as to why ninth grade academies were needed in high schools in this country.

High School Reforms

In the history of public education, interest groups protested for various things, such as developing a national curriculum with a set of uniform standards for all students and also placing more emphasis on mathematics and science, to name a few reform. Therefore, public school reform movements were not a new phenomena. In addition to the things mentioned, these movements are sometimes focused on curriculum, school size, inclusion, equal access, equity, and testing. Since public schools were created in Massachusetts in 1647 there have been outcries for reforms. For the purposes of this current study, two epochs in American history were mentioned as factors that propelled reform movements: (1) the launching of Sputnik and (2) the publishing of the “A Nation at Risk” report.

The Impact of Sputnik

In 1957 when Russia was the first country to venture into space, Americans believed that their public schools were inferior. Russia’s successful launching of Sputnik,

a space shuttle, was instrumental in sparking an impetus to increase the rigor in the math and science curricula in America's public schools. This reform movement originated from the National Defense Education Act of 1958. While this legislation created endowments for higher education institutions, its significance on public education came in the form of scientific equipment and the enhancement of science, math, and foreign language instruction (Castell, 2003).

A Nation at Risk

After a period of disgust in which many Americans were unimpressed with the quality of high school graduates (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), President Ronald Regan organized a group of experts to study schooling in the United States. This group, of social scientists, called the National Commission on Excellence in Education, was led by T. H. Bell, then Secretary of Education, attempted to explore the best ways to reform public high schools. The Commission examined public education due to the perceived mediocrity of high school graduates in America when compared to those from other countries, and the report of their findings, published in 1983, became known as "A Nation at Risk," which suggested practical educational strategies and areas of improvements.

High schools were being asked to revamp their curriculum, methodology, and teacher and student relationship paradigms in order to better serve the needs of students . . . In today's global economy, America's ability to compete depends on our ability to prepare high school graduates to be successful in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Too many high school graduates were not adequately prepared for postsecondary education or training, nor were they prepared to be competitive in the work force.

This report caused schools systems nationwide to intensify their content, rigor, and offerings of the math, science, social studies, and computer science classes. A

significant amount of time was devoted to fully comprehend how the sizes of the student body adversely affected students' success. Further, the National Research Council (2003) concluded that many students in large urban schools believed that teachers were not responsive to their needs. These reforms were in the embryonic stages of many of the change agents launched in American high schools during the 1980s and 1990s. Three particular high school reform models, First Things First, Career Academies, and Talent Development, provided the philosophical constructs that encapsulated the ninth grade academy concept.

First Things First

First Things First (FTF) was a high school reform method that was designed to combat the increasing number of students dropping out of school annually. This initiative was the brainchild of Jim Connell, co-founder of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education. In FTF, a learning environment was based on educational themes. Special emphasis was placed on smaller learning communities and parental advocacy. Students' academic performance was assessed periodically, and meetings with parents were scheduled to discuss achievements and area of deficiencies. In addition, students were looped throughout high school, receiving instruction from one group of teachers. This was done to help students develop rapport and create a sense of community. These educators shared a common plan to better facilitate instruction and provided immediate remediation for any student in need of assistance. The final component of this ideology was to give educators access to professional development that provided them with the tools necessary to deliver classroom instruction that was engaging and aligned with State standards (Quint, 2005).

Career Academies

This was one of the first high school reform measures implemented to resolve many issues facing secondary education in the U.S. A cornerstone of this concept was to create a “community within the school.” This was done by developing the “school-within-a-school” model. Basically, small schools (either vocational or college preparatory) were established within the traditional larger comprehensive high school. Career academies attempted to create a nurturing environment whereby students either learned a trade or prepared for postsecondary education. The family component of this model was a deliberate attempt to eradicate the alienation many freshmen felt upon entering high school (Kemple & Snipes, 2000)

Talent Development

An essential element of the talent development model gave birth to the ninth grade academy. After years of examining issues surrounding high school drop-out, this model was crafted to seclude freshman and provide them with extended instructional time in their core subjects throughout the school day. It was suggested that ninth graders be afforded extended time to enrich their reading skills (Jerald, 2006). Furthermore, it was suggested that these students received their instructions from a core group of teachers who shared a common planning and assessment time.

Facts about High School Drop-outs

The drop-out rate had consistently increased in this country since 1984 (Miao & Wheelock, 2005). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), annually, 1.2 million students failed to graduate from high school. A report televised by CNN documented that “...7,000 students drop-out of school daily; one every 26 seconds”

(Wooldridge, 2010). Chutes (1999) stated that drop-out rates nationally had reached the mid-20% range. This issue was given more credence with the work of Mehta (2008), who reported that more than 30% of the nation's high school students never received a diploma. Reents (2002) ascertained that of those students who dropped out of school, ninth graders were the majority. This was true regardless of students' racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background. The situation was even more alarming for children in urban areas. In addition, Wilson (2004) explicitly declared that of "...the nation's 100 largest cities, 50% or more" students attended schools that had problems graduating children" (p. 70). These factors were more alarming when considering that the vast majority of students who drop-out of school do so at the ninth grade level (Gewertz, 2007). The national attrition rate for students going from 9th grade to 10th grade was a little above 11%. However, the schools examined in the current study have a state attrition rate for ninth graders around 13.9% (State Report Card, 2010).

An examination of drop-outs' academic performance indicated that poor grades, although not the primary factor, contributed to a student's decision to leave school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Studies suggested that students who dropped out of school failed a fourth of their required classes during their freshman year (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

Increased Drop-Out Rate among Minorities

The drop-out rate in America's public schools was in crisis mode. The picture was more depressing for males than females and even worse when rates were categorized according to ethnicity. The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research revealed in a study that nationally, female students graduated from high school at a higher rate than male

students and that there was a significant gap in the graduation rate between Whites and minorities annually (Green & Winters, 2006). When describing the troubling state of public education, The U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan publicly acknowledged that "...25 percent of all students and almost 40 percent of Black and Hispanic students fail to graduate high school on time" (Downey, 2010).

According the National Center for Education Statistic (NCES), during the 2007–2008 school year, nationally there were 613,379 high school drop-outs (Stillwell, 2010). For this report, individuals were considered "drop-outs" if they were between the ages of 16 and 24 years and had not earned a high school diploma or equivalency certificate. In 2008, the NCES reported the drop-out percent for Whites as 4%, Blacks as 9%, and Hispanics as 18%.

Another report, "Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis," announced that in 2007, 6.2 million students between the ages of 16 and 24 years had dropped out of school, which was approximately 9% (Center for Labor Market Studies [CLMS], 2009). The authors concluded that the greatest numbers of drop-outs were among Black and Hispanic males. Specifically, they indicated that one in five males in this age range had dropped out of school. When examining this phenomenon by ethnicity, the comparison was even more dismal. Their findings uncovered the following in terms of drop-outs as it related to racial groups: "Latinos were at 27.5 percent, while the numbers for Blacks were 21 percent as opposed to only 12 percent for Whites" (CLMS, 2009).

Historical Context for Ninth Grade Academies

The need for ninth grade academies in the United States emerged as a result of several factors that emerged in the early 1990s. While there was no single reason that compelled young people to exit schools prior to graduation, researchers compiled a list of factors that inevitably lead to students dropping out of school: (1) failing one or more classes, (2) school being boring, (3) inconsistent school attendance pattern, (4) no connection with the school or school-affiliated activities, (5) no motivation to attend school or poor performance in class, (6) habitual disciplinary referrals, and (7) being bullied by older students (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009). The two most prominent reasons given by drop-outs were the size of high schools' student bodies compared to those of the middle schools, coupled with the physical size of the comprehensive high schools (Legters & Kerr, 2001). These two components contributed to many freshmen students feeling "lost" in a sea of anonymity; these issues became more apparent to educators across the country. Analyzing ninth graders in her school district, Nadine Kujawa, former Superintendent of Aldine Independent School District in Texas, proclaimed that more ninth graders had dropped out of school because they had gotten lost in large high school settings and were shown less attention by the adults at these schools (Cook, Harris, & Fowler, 2008).

This was best illustrated with the following analogy: When top scholars and athletes from middle school who were once prized students at their middle school campuses arrive at a massive high school and nobody knows their names, they may experience a role loss (Newman, Meyers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000). Combined with this was the spree of school shootings and other physical acts of aggression that led

many districts as well as school administrators to impose more stringent rules and disciplinary procedures at the building level. As a result, the atmosphere, many times, was not as warm and welcoming as the smaller middle school setting. This environment was apparent and identifiable to freshmen when they arrived on the high school campus and was an early catalyst for many ninth graders to disengage from their new schools. As a result, many students had no connection with their schools, thus making it easier for them to drop-out.

The purpose of creating ninth grade academies was multifaceted. The primary purpose was to assist freshmen with their transition to high school. In addition, many scholars were advocates for ninth grade academies in an effort to decrease the number of students who failed the ninth grade each year and increase the promotion rate at this grade level (Morgan & Hertzog, 1999). Reents (2002) found that high schools with thorough, complete transition programs (at least a year in duration) had drop-out rates of 8% as compared to 24% for schools without any transition strategies in place.

Justification for Ninth Grade Academies

Ninth grade was a critical period in the educational lives of students. Rourke (2001) indicated that students who passed ninth grade were more likely to graduate from high school in four years. The push for ninth grade academies was due in part to the disproportionate number of students in ninth grade across the nation. This abundant number of ninth graders led many scholars to refer to this grade level as the “ninth-grade bulge.” This fact was highlighted by Wilson (2004) when she surmised that “...there were more ninth graders in United States high schools than any other class; because many students either were not being promoted to the tenth grade or were dropping out before

they get there (pp.69).” Inversely, the small number of ninth graders being promoted to tenth grade prompted researchers to label this phenomenon as the “*tenth grade dip*.” This national crisis was best illustrated in a statistical report from the National Center for the Educational Statistics (NCES, 2005), which cited the number of students enrolled nationally in the ninth grade during the 2003–2004 school year and subsequently the number of students who were enrolled as tenth graders during the 2004–2005 school year which indicated approximately a 10.5% loss of students in one school year. Findings from this report indicated that this “*dip*” in these numbers were two-fold: (1) many students did not earn enough credits to be classified as tenth graders, and (2) a large number of students decided to drop-out of school prior to reaching tenth grader.

The number of students retained in ninth grade far exceeded those students repeating any other grade. Coupled with this information was the knowledge that fewer students were being promoted to tenth grade than any other grade (Mioa & Wheelock, 2005). Mioa and Wheelock (2005) surmised that ninth grade retention was detrimental to students’ self-efficacy and was one of the mitigating factors to many discipline problems at this grade level. Many school districts created ninth grade academies to curtail this spiraling epidemic.

The importance of developing an intervention program to address the problem of ninth grade drop-out was discussed by Reents (2002) when she stated that if students were to graduate, then their freshman year was the most critical during their academic careers. Moreover, Chute (1999) examined a Pittsburgh school district and revealed that ninth graders, more than students at any other grade level, were at imminent risk of failure. These sentiments were also reported by Mehta (2008), who claimed that

“...freshmen [were] more likely than upperclassmen to fail a class or be suspended.” The number of students dropping out of school at the ninth grade level has increased. Over the last 20 years, there have been several initiatives to mitigate this problem. White (2008) expressed that the growing concern about students dropping outs gave momentum to many school districts organizing freshmen academies. Another factor leading to the movement toward freshman academies was poor student achievement. Fulk (2003) professed this causation as a driving force for creating ninth grade academies.

Composition of Ninth-Grade academies

The influence of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) resonates within the philosophical framework of ninth grade academies. The CES was an ideological high school reform paradigm that originated in 1984 from the collaborative efforts of Dr. TheodoreSizer and Arthur G. Powell. These scholars created the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Sizer and Powell asserted that schools could be restructured by shifting the mindset of how effective schools would operate rather than by creating a model of what they would look like. They contended that in order for high schools to be effective, it was imperative that they be grounded in nine common principles, several of which are espoused by the proponents of the ninth grade academy:

Help students to learning to use their mind well. Emphasize less was more, depth over coverage. Goals apply to all students. Personalization teaching and learning (teachers would only work with a small number of students). Embrace the metaphor; student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach. Require demonstration of mastery through exhibition (Diploma was awarded when mastery was proven). A tone of decency and trust (Parents should be treated as essential collaborators). Commitment to the entire school (Educators were generalists first and specialists second). Resources dedicated to teaching and learning. Democracy and equity (this principle was added later, in the mid-nineties). (Cushman, 2006, pp. 48)

The ninth grade academy was a high school reform that came to fruition in the latter half of the 20th century. In order for this reform initiative to be successful, there were some specific controls that had to be in place. Instructional leaders had to have a sound foundation regarding the understanding of the “small learning community” concept and the way ninth grade academies evolved from that ideology. These instructional leaders must also be aware of the negative potential that student disengagement had on freshmen and its high propensity for supporting dropping out of school at this grade level (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). Finally, if the ninth grade academy movement was to be effective in successfully transitioning freshmen through high school, it was imperative that instructional leaders developed a collaborative partnership with parents. The following conceptual framework regarding the particular components that were necessary for the creation of a ninth grade academy were germane to this study. Although all aspects were not mandatory for an academy to be functional without a facsimile of these essential principles, an effective institution of higher learning was not practical.

Small Learning Communities

For purposes of the current study, large high schools were defined as a school with a student population over 900 children. Research was available indicating that students’ achievement at large schools was disaggregated along racial lines (Lee & Smith, 1996). Raywid (1996) contended that small learning communities (SLCs) were advantageous for poor and minority children. Raywid (1996) purported that economically challenged and minority students achieved their academic potential in greater numbers when in smaller school settings. This trend was supported by Lee and Smith (1996), who asserted that minority children were scholastically more proficient in smaller schools. In

smaller schools, there was a stronger sense of belonging, and students were known individually. Raywid (1996) further contended that smaller environments were more conducive to learning because there was more of a chance to receive individualized instruction and assistance when needed. Conversely, Howley (1996) confirmed that students from affluent families performed better academically in high schools with large student bodies, while the opposite is true for pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

While there was no consensus on the preferred student body size for a comprehensive high school in this country, Lee and Smith (1996) championed the idea that high school enrollment not exceed 900 children. Robertson (2001) reported that 75% of the high schools in the United States had student enrollments of 1,000 children or more, although empirical studies revealed that schools maximized their potential effectiveness and efficiency when their student enrollment exceeded 900 students. For high schools to optimize the effectiveness of SLCs, specific actions were necessary: (1) there were well-defined entities with clear purposes and role objectives that were articulated; (2) their focus were conceptualized through themes; (3) the learning environment had to be collaborative; (4) decision-making was shared; and (5) all stakeholders had to be actively engaged in the governance process (Irmsher, 1997). The last portion of this section described how ninth grade academies as small learning communities were essential to resolving the drop-out problem in America's public schools.

The enormous size of high schools in this country was enough to intimidate anyone, especially individuals struggling with self-esteem issues, personal identity

complexes, and feelings of loneliness (Black, 2004). Haviland (2005) stated that freshmen who attended high schools on campuses with large student bodies be oriented in a smaller, more controlled environment. Black (2004) poignantly claimed that large campuses and the aloof atmosphere that existed at many high schools helped to alienate incoming freshmen. This theme resonated with Cushman (2006), who wrote about the apprehension of 16 ninth graders starting high school in Indianapolis, IN. In a survey, the students voiced that their greatest fear was that the high school would be huge and confusing. The numbers of students at high schools along with the sizes of the comprehensive high schools were factors that expedited the ninth grade academy movement.

Chute (1999) reported that high schools with enrollment numbers between 1,000 and 1,500 students have higher retention rates, and those students with the greatest propensity to repeat were freshmen. This idea was supported by Chmelynski (2004), who asserted that the ninth grade academy model was developed as a means to ensure that freshmen were not engulfed by the large masses of upper-classmen. Often, this was accomplished by segregating them either on a particular hall or optimally in a separate building. While this seclusion restricted their movement, the benefit rested in the fact that these students were more focused. Holland and Mazzoli (2001) shared the opinion that unless school officials developed SLC and engaged with incoming freshmen, the drop-out rate would continue to be a problem. Mehta (2008) agreed that SLCs—specifically ninth grade academies—were the solution to the increasing number of students dropping out of school as freshmen.

I, as the researcher, was unable to locate any research that illustrated how to implement an SLC within a traditional high school; however, ninth grade academies were one of the best examples of an SLC. These academies were established as interventions to the large number of freshmen dropping out of school annually (Chmelynski, 2004). When first created, the ninth grade academy was coined as a school-within-a-school (SWS). Numerous scholars had developed theories about efficient methods to operate SWSs. According to Grooms (2008), these academies were totally independent from their host schools. Their aim was to assimilate freshmen smoothly through the rigors of the first year of high school to facilitate academic promotion by the end of the year. Raywid (1996) suggested three attributes that academies must possess in order to be effective schools: (1) There had to be distinctiveness about the academy that made it a separate entity. This meant that there had to be an instructional leader making decisions about the academy; completely independent of the larger school. (2) The configuration that worked best was one where freshmen were completely separated from upper-classmen. While this was the most preferred option, logistic (finding a facility) and funding such an endeavor was an insurmountable job for most districts. (3) The approach utilized most often was a partial segregated method. When this model was employed, the ninth grade academy served students on separate wings, floors, and/or halls. There were several adaptations of the SLC philosophy.

Discussing the employment of SLCs in public schools, Oxley (2005) declared that the composition of SLCs should be as follows: teachers, who have the autonomy to develop instruction that best fits students' needs, should work on teams with a few hundred children (over a couple of school years). Oxley theorized that by allowing the

teacher-student relationship to develop in small learning communities, educators will be better able to meet the diverse needs of their students. Oxley (2005) was adamant that the teaming concept of the SLC was imperative to students achieving their academic potential. Furthermore, she proclaimed that common planning of teams was beneficial because the curriculum was shaped according to students' deficiencies. For this concept to reach its intended goal, certain criteria were met.

Oxley (2005) surmised that there was a shared mission and vision for the community in place. All stakeholders had to know the purpose of the community. Due to the fact that the community was small, its participants were better able to accept ownership of its purpose and became actively engaged in the group processes. Oxley (2005) further emphasized that an SLC had to have leadership that manages on-site, teachers were grouped in teams with a heavy concentration on interdisciplinary lessons, and all stakeholders collaborated to ensure students' success. Much of the dissent regarding SLCs revolved around the premise of what was "small." Specifically, the conversation focused on what was an optimal size for an SLC. Ideally, the best size for a SLC was relative to a community; however, some scholars attempted to quantify this paradigm. Allensworth and Easton (2007), revealed that SLCs had no quantifiable impact on student achievement; however, the ninth grade students in these SLCs tended to improve their attendance patterns, which correlated with them performing better academically (David, 2008).

Student Disengagement

One facet of the problem of ninth grade drop-out warranting scrutiny was ninth graders' lack of involvement in school activities. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) disclosed

that disengagement was a prevailing theme that motivated students to quit school. They proposed a concept called the participation-identification model that maintained that students who were engaged in school-sponsored activities were better connected with the school and felt a sense of ownership. However, the opposite was true for students who were not involved with any school organizations or groups, as they felt marginalized. Oftentimes, many ninth graders who eventually dropped out of school fell into the second group of students, which makes it easier for them to disengage from school altogether. This notion was also supported by Allensworth and Easton (2007) when they mentioned that students who were involved with extracurricular activities had lower failure rates, higher grades, and were less inclined to quit school. The idea of interweaving student involvement with academic performance was crystallized by others as well. Lampert (2005) advocated the ninth grade academy model as a solution to the drop-out epidemic when she stated that student achievement was correlated with a transition program that significantly attached them with the school and other stakeholders. Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) supported this ideological framework as well, ascertaining that ninth grade academies should purposely create programs that actively engaged all students, which in turn increased their probability for academic success. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) purported that although a majority of the students who ultimately drop-out of school were not *connected* with their school, quitting school was a thought that many students contemplated prior to their ninth-grade school year.

A student quitting school was not an event that happens over night. It was a process students participated in throughout their educational careers, and dropping out was the culminating event. Balfanz et al. (2007) mentioned some of students' decisions,

e.g., not attending school regularly, poor academic performance, and habitual referrals to the principal's office, as indicators that a student was beginning to disengage from school, which usually led to them dropping out. When examined in totality, student disengagement was usually paired with their alienation from school, a lack of participation in any extracurricular activities or organizations, and a general disdain for school (Lehr et al., 2004). These apathetic feelings were underlying factors that necessitated the existence of SLCs, more specifically ninth grade academies.

Parental Involvement

Ninth grade has been referred to literally as a holding tank for children (Reents, 2002). It was at this point in the educational lives of students that those who were going to quit school lingered until they were either forced to leave or quit on their own. Historically, more students—regardless of their ethnic background—repeat ninth grade more than any other grade. For these reasons parental involvement was more paramount at the high school level. However, for some unexplainable reason, it was at this point (during the transition from middle to high school) that parents became disengaged in their children's educational lives (Sisson, 2010). Johnson (2010) affirmed that parents of ninth grade students acknowledge their children's apprehension about attending high school and attempt to relieve them of their anxieties by staying active at the school and having constant conversations with them. Bridgeland, Diluio, and Morison (2006) stressed the importance of parental involvement in a child's potential to graduate from high school, declaring that when parents were not active in their children's schooling, there was an increased probability for the student to quit school within the first two years of high school.

Parental involvement was one of those ambiguous terms that educators often use; however, when they were pressured to define it, no two individuals produced the same meaning. LaBahn (1995) suggested that parental involvement be described as the consistent level of active participation and commitment of parents to their children's school and education. LaBahn (1995) acknowledged that when parents were involved with their children's education more often than not, the child reached their educational benchmarks. Ivey (2002) contended that a good plan of action should involve collaboration between schools and parents where parents establish high academic goals for their children, develop clear lines of communications, and establish positive relationships with educators. Ivey (2002) commented that when parents were active at their child's school, the student had a better attitude about school and performed better academically. In a meta-analysis of 140 studies of students attending United States public schools, psychologist William H. Jeynes indicated that when parents were involved with their children's education, the circumstances of disciplinary problems and the probability of these students being bullied were negligible (Seal, 2010).

For the purpose of the current study, Eagle's (1989) definition of parental involvement was most appropriate. Eagle (1989) contended that there was a consistent line of communication between educators and parents, whereby parents served as at-home educators to facilitate learning that occurred at school. Although there was no universal definition of parental involvement, Dr. Joyce Epstein, from the Center for Social Organization of Schools created six specific strategies (or types) for incorporating parents in schools: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with the community (Johnson, 2010).

In a focus group of teachers and principals addressing the drop-out epidemic in America, over 70% cited the lack of parental involvement as a precipitating factor that encouraged students to quit school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz, 2009). These authors also found that 80% of instructional leaders thought that high schools should be more proactive in soliciting parental support earlier than when the student began to struggle academically (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz, 2009). Eagle (1989) professed that regardless of a family's socioeconomic situation, students performed better in schools when their parents were involved in the process. Eagle (1989) concluded that in situations where parents were incorporated in their student's high school experiences, the child had an 8:10 chance of attending a postsecondary institution.

Chapter Summary

This chapter commenced by illuminating the issue of the high school reform movement that focused on high school drop-outs. What alarmed scholars more was the fact that annually, 1.2 million students failed to graduate, while 7,000 students dropped out of school each year; of these statistics, freshmen composed the largest classification of any group of students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Reents (2002) asserted that this fact was true across racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic status. Moreover, scholars suggested that economically challenged and minority children performed better academically in smaller school environments (Raywid, 1996).

Two of the more significant trains of thought in this section were the importance of parental involvement in the lives of ninth grade students and the fact that it was imperative to keep freshmen actively involved in school activities. Bridgeland et al. (2006) were adamant in their proclamation that when parents were not active in their

children's schooling there was an increased probability that students quit high school within the first two years. By keeping parents involved in a child's schooling, students had a higher propensity to engage in the life of the school, which ultimately led to graduation. This ideology was supported by Allensworth and Easton (2007), who mentioned that students involved in extracurricular activities had lower failure rates, higher grades, and were less inclined to quit school.

One of the most compelling reasons to reform traditional high schools stemmed from the size of the student bodies in public high schools. According to the National Research Council (2003), urban high schools with student bodies of over 1,000 pupils were not effective and were "breeding grounds" for student failure. The high school reformation movement has had a long legacy in public education in this country, and many groups have collaborated to achieve equity and equality for children to receive a quality education regardless of gender, race/ethnic origin, or physical/mental disabilities. From these coalitions, there has been more emphasis in math and science as well as a renewed focus on national standards (established by the report "A Nation at Risk"). The evolution of school reform movements ultimately led to the creation of small learning communities, specifically ninth grade academies.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, I discussed qualitative research as an inquiry-based field of study and examined participants and sites selection. Risks or benefits that were discussed as well, any ethical or political concerns illuminated. Data collection and analysis methods utilized in this study were described, along with the ways the data were debriefed. Finally, a systematic description of my role as the researcher was highlighted.

Case Study

Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003) defined case study as "an analytical study of the development of an individual unit, as a person, family, or a social institution" (p. 202). In qualitative research, Creswell (2005) defined case study as a type of in-depth examination in which the researcher concentrated on a program, event, or individuals engaged in particular activity. Robert Stake, an expert on case study in the social sciences, affirmed that case study was both a methodology and a research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I subscribed to this ideology and employed both processes in this study. Case study, as a methodology, was socially constructed. Following this approach, individuals formed their knowledge of the world around them on the basis of their lived experiences. Finally, in this paradigm, knowledge was constructed from the bottom up, meaning that information was collected from a broad-to-specific perspective. This methodology concluded during the early part of the 2011 winter, at that time I contacted any respondent who according to Stake, helped researchers acquire more depth about the topic being studied. Oftentimes, the principle directing many researchers

conducting case studies was their attempt to illuminate any commonalities and/or particularities about individuals that attributed to the larger group.

Moreover, Stake asserted that there were three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective as cited in (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In an intrinsic case study, the researcher wanted to better appreciate a subject. In an instrumental case study, the researcher wanted to provide clarity to a topic or pre-existing theory. Finally, in a collective case study, multiple cases were studied together to help the researcher gather an understanding of a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The current study was multi-site research project employing a collective case study, gathering information from two participants (both instructional leaders) at two different sites (ninth grade academies). The multi-site case study approach embodied my attempt to conduct inquiry into more than one subject at various time intervals on the same topic. Although multi-site case studies can occur simultaneously, they do not have to.

The collective case study approach was most appropriate for the current study so that I fully developed a better appreciation for instructional leadership at ninth grade academies. It was paramount that the focus of the investigation during a case study was on each individual case, not the entire population.

Selection of Research Sites and Participants

Purposeful sampling methodology was used for site selection in an effort to better understand the shared phenomenon. Purposeful sampling was one of the most prominent sampling techniques used in qualitative research, where participants and sites were determined by prearranged criteria to reach data saturation (when new information no longer yields insight regarding the topic being researched) (Patton, 2002). In qualitative

studies, researchers traditionally limit their sample sizes to a relatively small number. Creswell (2005) asserted that the selection of participants and sites be based on a participant's ability to further the researcher's understanding of the shared phenomenon. The participants and sites were intentionally identified and generally have similar characteristics and traits, which was known as "homogenous sampling." In homogeneous sampling, the researcher purposefully selected participants and sites based on identifiable traits of members within a specific subset (Creswell, 2005). In applying this technique, I believed that the participants and sites selected were information-rich and, as a result, contributed significantly to my knowledge base.

Research Sites. Both of the academies selected for this research project were in the same school district. These research sites had diverse student bodies and reflected a modern metropolitan community. The schools were located in a suburban school district in a Southern state. This particular school district was the fourth largest school district in its state. According to the district's website, it served 53,000 students, with an annual population increase of approximately 1,000 children. This trend has been consistent for the last five years. According to this district's State Report Card, racial demographics were 52% White, 38% Black, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 5% Hispanic.

Comprehensive high schools that served students in grades 9 through 12 were selected for the study; these schools were chosen if they had an educational leader who was primarily responsible for the daily operations of the academy. Student enrollment at these academies ranged from 250 to 500 pupils; schools with such student enrollment numbers were better able to develop efficient teams. According to the Klonskys (1999), ninth grade students performed better academically in smaller school settings in which

they felt connected or had a sense of belonging, which was at the core of academies. The academies selected housed their ninth graders either partially (on a separate floor or wing) or completely in isolation (a building just for them). A selection preference was afforded to those academies where ninth graders were secluded from other students. Mehta (2008), suggested that students in ninth grade academies be segregated from other students, which appeared to be a best practice in terms of the structure that best facilitated student achievement.

Alpha Academy. Alpha Academy was officially established 1927. It sits on 22 1/2 acres of land, which physically comprised 285,651 square feet. Alpha Academy was unique in that it attracted students from both rural and urban communities. The population of the city where Alpha Academy was located was 10,433 (U.S. Census, 2000). Alpha Academy was the only high school in this community. It served students from grades 9 to 12. During the 2009–2010 school year, there were 1,453 students; 428 of these students were ninth graders.

According to the state's Department of Education Report Card, 76.7% of the students at Alpha Academy were classified as "economically disadvantaged"; this meant that 77% of the children who attended this school were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. In addition, 6% of the families living in the city where this school was located lived below the national poverty level (U.S. Census, 2000). Alpha Academy utilized a ninth grade academy where all the students were housed in a separate building from the other students.

Special K Academy. Special K Academy was erected in 1905 and sits on 11 acres of land, with buildings covering 330,000 square feet. The students who attended

Special K Academy came from a suburban community, and the population of the city where this school was located was 42,795. Special K Academy was the only high school in this community. It served students from grades 9 to 12. During the 2009–2010 school year, the student population was 1,924 students; 495 of these students were ninth graders.

The median household income for the county where Special K is located was \$63,614, while it was \$99,239 for the city where this school was located (U.S. Census, 2000). The information provided by the school's report card indicated that 9.9% of the students at Special K Academy were classified as "economically disadvantaged;" this meant that nearly 10% of the children who attended this school received free or reduced lunch. In addition, 87% of the families living in the community where this Academy was located own their homes (U.S. Census, 2000).

Research Participants

Two instructional leaders from schools that had ninth grade academies within a suburban school district were selected for the current investigation. Invitations were extended to individuals who were instructional leaders at schools with ninth grade academies. I selected instructional leaders working at schools with diverse student populations. By utilizing the aforementioned selection criteria, a better sense of community was achieved.

Gary Howard (2007) proclaimed that in order for instructional leaders to become proficient at educating the rapidly changing student population that became more diverse, they had to adopt new pedagogies and competencies. Being able to acquire access into these ninth grade academies to observe and interview these instructional leaders gave me the opportunity to obtain first-hand information about the shared experiences that these

instructional leaders possessed. This was important to increase the inquirer's knowledge base to either support or refute the available data.

The instructional leader at Alpha Academy was Mr. Eddie Robinson (pseudonym), who has been an educator and employed in his current district for 11 years. Mr. Robinson worked at Alpha Academy for nine years, and all of this time had been working with ninth grade students. The ninth grade academy concept at Alpha Academy was in operation for six years; Mr. Robinson was an instructional leader for three years.

The instructional leader at Special K Academy was Mrs. Exemplary Eva, was an educator for 27 years. Mrs. Eva worked in five different school districts in three different Southern states. She was an instructional leader for three years at her current school; however, since the inception of the ninth grade academy at Special K two years ago, she had been its instructional leader. Mrs. Eva was employed in her current school district for 12 years and had 24 years of experience working with children with special educational needs.

Risks and Benefits

There were no immediate risks to any of the individuals involved in the current study. An informed consent form describing the research process and stating the policies of voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw at any time (see Appendix A) was signed by participating instructional leaders. The identities of the participants and the research sites were referred to by pseudonyms, to remain anonymous. Finally, there were no benefits for any person who participated in this study.

Data Collection Methods

In the current study, three data collection methods (i.e. observations, interviews, focus groups) were utilized to retrieve information. Two instructional leaders working in ninth grade academies were observed at least times two each and interviewed three times separately. Both of the instructional leaders involved in this inquiry were informed of the following prior to data collection: (1) what data were collected, (2) how the data were processed, (3) intended use of the data, and (4) the expected audience(s) of the study. Finally, the instructional leaders participated in a focus group session.

Permission was granted by the associated Institutional Review Board before any research commenced. After receiving approval, a copy of this approval was given to the district's gatekeeper. Since the participants in this study were school district employees, I had to obtain authorization from their respective school district. The gatekeeper at the district level required a copy of my prospectus, any instrument (s) that was utilized during the study, and the completion of the district's Request to Conduct Research application (see Appendix B).

Observations. Using observation was thoroughly outlined by Creswell (2007), who recommended the following:

Select a site or group of participants that yielded the most comprehensive picture of the topic studied. The researcher gradually acclimated themselves with the site and participants in order to develop a trustworthy relationship. Once this rapport was established the inquirer determined how the observation process was carried out and which role was assumed. (pp. 138-139)

At this stage the researcher identified the number of observations (two observations of each instructional leader) to conduct. These data collection methods were crafted from a perspective of retrieving general information (initial observations) to

narrowing very specific observations as the researcher reached his final number of observations.

While observing the researcher had the ability to obtain first-hand data by watching and listening to the participants in their natural environment (Creswell, 2005). When collecting data through the observation method; the researcher had one of three specific roles to assume: participant observer, nonparticipant observer and the changing observational role. As a participant observant, the researcher was intricately engrossed in the events at the site and with the subjects examined while recording what was observed. The second role that the researcher had the option to portray was one of a nonparticipant observer. In this capacity the inquirer solely watched and recorded the activities and actions of the participants at the research site but did not become involved in any events or exchanges with the research subjects. The last methodological stance that the researcher had was one of a changing observational role. In this position the researcher switched repeatedly from a participatory to non-participatory observer. Depending upon the participants' comfort level, the researcher commenced the observation process by actively being involved (participatory) and over a period of time gradually switching to a non-participatory role (Creswell, 2007).

For this research process, I observed as a nonparticipant. I chose this method of observation because I wanted to monitor these instructional leaders in their natural setting without any interactions or interferences from me. Additionally, I utilized an observational protocol adapted from Creswell (2005) see Appendix C. The first method that I utilized to collect data during this research process was that of observations.

During the late fall of 2010, the instructional leaders who had agreed to participate in this study were contacted. Each instructional leader was e-mailed the following documents: a cover letter (see Appendix D) which explained in detail the scope of this study and an informed consent to participate in this study (Appendix A). In an effort to obtain full participation from the instructional leaders in this study a follow-up email was sent to those individuals who do not respond to the initial email within a two-week time frame. If no contact was made after the second email a phone call was made to determine if the instructional leader wanted the document mailed to him/her.

Interviews. In qualitative inquiry interviewing was a tool employed to extract detailed information from research subjects. Qualitative interviews were not restricted to specific questions. The interviewer used them as a guide and where appropriate elaborated on an answer given by a participant. Baker (1999) also suggested that the interviewer resist the compulsion to dominate the conversation. The interview was constructed more as a dialogue between two people where ideas and opinions of the interviewee were free flowing. The interviewer was the facilitator in this process who was attempting to capture the lived experiences of the research participants through a casual conversation. Baker (1999) extended this position when she stated that the researcher was interested in the emotional connections that the participants had with their responses to particular questions. While the researcher was dependent upon his participants to be truthful in their responses to answer questions in detail, interviewing was a vital methodology in qualitative inquiry because it allowed the researcher to explore the lived world of the participant (Patton, 2002). Each participant was told the specifics regarding the interviews and rationale for each meeting at the beginning of each

session. The set of guiding questions (see Appendix E) that shaped this study was recited and explained to the instructional leaders. For the purpose of this study an interview protocol (see Appendix F) was utilized that was adopted from the work of Creswell (2005), which best suited the style of this researcher.

The foremost authority regarding conducting interviews for qualitative research was Irving Seidman. In his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, Seidman (2006) recommended that the novice researcher conducted at least three interviews with a research subject, to last for at least 90 minutes each. It was his position that each interview be conducted within a two-to three-week time span. Seidman (2006) specifically denoted the purpose for each meeting: interview 1 (see Appendix G) established the context of the participant's experiences by illuminating the person's background and placing the event in its historical context. Interview 2 (see Appendix H) focused on the participant's lived experiences within the capacity of the phenomenon studied. Finally, the third interview (see Appendix I) illuminated the meaning that the lived experience had on the participant. For the purpose of my study, I followed the format outlined by Seidman when I conducted my interviews.

The researcher used a tape recorder in an effort to accurately report each instructional leader's response. All recordings were transcribed within a timely manner and emailed back to the instructional leaders so that their intended answer(s) were given to each question. Each interview was composed of 10-15 open-ended questions. This format allowed participants the freedom to answer questions in their own words. They were not limited to predetermined "yes" or "no" answers. Moreover, the qualitative approach to inquiry afforded the researcher the opportunity to expound on respondents'

answers. There was more flexibility in this process as opposed to conducting quantitative approach (Patton, 2002).

Focus Study Groups. The third data collection method used was focus study groups. Focus Study Groups was a strategy that was pioneered by sociologist Robert K. Merton at Columbia University. He created focus study groups in an attempt to generate responses from groups of people regarding issues of interest to them (Kaufman, 2003). The uniqueness of a focus study group was that participants elaborated on their opinions as this process yielded valuable data within a sociable environment (Patton, 2002). The business community perfected the use of these groups to gauge the public's acceptance for a particular product and as well as political pundits in their attempt to persuade voters' opinions positively or negatively regarding an issue or candidate. I used focus study groups as a method to retrieve data during my research process. In an effort to achieve saturation, ("the state where the researcher makes the subjective determination that additional data will not provide any new information") (Creswell, 2005, p. 598), these instructional leaders were invited to participate in a focus study group.

Focus study groups were interviews. More succinctly focus study groups were loosely structured discussions between individuals who shared a mutual pre-determined characteristic (s) that was defined by the researcher. These sessions were composed of a maximum of 10 participants, which lasted no longer than an hour, and a half in duration. The focus study group occurred after the interviews have been completed and the recordings transcribed. These sessions were scheduled at a facility that had good audio and video recording accommodations. There were a maximum of 20 open-ended questions that stemmed from themes that resonated from individual's responses during

their interviews. This format allowed the researcher to better understand the world from the participants' perspective (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

My philosophy regarding data analysis was an inductive qualitative approach, which simply means that I worked from a general to detail perspective. The format that I followed to conduct my analysis was a merger of the work Gary Shank (2006) and John Creswell (2005) that I adapted to suit my methodology. This phase was considered the introductory step of the process where the researcher identified the general scope that was implemented for data analysis. At this phase I explored and combed the data in an attempt to determine if more fieldwork was necessary. I thoroughly and carefully read the data. I read the transcripts of the interviews, notes from observations and the focus study group in their entirety. While reading these artifacts for the second and subsequent times, I made notes in the margins that resonated with me. Creswell (2005) suggested that the researcher read the data several times only writing memos or notes after the first reading in an effort to obtain a deeper understanding of what the participant meant.

Phase II This was the step in the process where the researcher determined how he was going to organize the data. During this phase I followed the teachings of Creswell (2005) who suggested that the data be organized. For the purpose of this study the data were organized and stored according to its site in an individual file folder. A separate file was developed for each method used to collect data (two observations, and three interviews, and one focus study group). In an effort to preserve consistency, a duplicate of every source of data collected were stored in an alternative location. The next

emphasis in this process was the concept of open coding. Creswell (2007) defines open coding as the classification of data into major categories.

I divided the data into small segments. The next step was to give each segment a rich descriptive label or code. Optimally, I limited myself to 10 codes. These codes were either in my words or “vivo codes,” direct quotes taken from the instructional leaders. After thoroughly examining these codes, I combined any overlapping codes. Creswell (2005) asserted that the researcher eliminate data that did not support the over arching focus of the study. These new categories were classified as themes. This process of moving from a large group of codes to a relative small number of codes was known as lean coding in qualitative research. Furthermore, Creswell (2005) commented that the researcher should extract specific quotes from participants to support the anticipated themes. I moved from several broad codes to a few specific themes that focused on the phenomenon studied.

Phase III. This was the step where the researcher attempted to explain what the data actually said. Ideally, I wanted only three to four themes. At this step all the major themes were identified. I took the major themes and descriptively narrated categories pertaining to the experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies based on the retrieved data. This concept was referred to as axial coding in the qualitative inquiry approach. According to Creswell (2007) to accurately perform axial coding the researcher takes a major theme, and then analyze the data to determine the following: what factor (s) precipitated this event, were there any reactions from the phenomenon, were there any details which impacted the reactions to the phenomenon, and what were the outcomes. The last level of coding was selective. Basically what I did was to retrieve this analysis

model and narrated a descriptive account of the dynamics of instructional leadership at a ninth grade academy.

Implementation

Phase I. During the spring of 2011 I submitted the documentation to the Institutional Review Board to obtain approval which was necessary to begin the research process. Simultaneously, I prepared my dissertation proposal to present to my committee in an effort to establish a working agreement that was acceptable to all parties involved. In conjunction with this I completed a request to Conduct Research with the Director of Middle and High School Education in the fall of 2010 with the school district where the two research participants and selected school sites were located. I sent out emails to instructional leaders asking them to participate in this research projects. Once this was done by the early winter of 2010, I conducted two observations of each participating instructional leader. Phase 1 was concluded during the early part of the 2010 winter, at that time I contacted any respondent who had not replied to the first e-mail.

Phase II. This phase commenced during the early spring of 2010, I observed the two instructional leaders in this research project. I monitored these instructional leaders on two separate occasions in their natural environment. After the observations I established a time to interview instructional leaders who agreed to participate in this research project. Once the interviews were conducted I transcribed the data within 48 hours. After this the notes were sent to the participants so they could ensure what was typed was accurate and intended. After this process was completed, I conducted an analysis of the data from these interviews. This completed phase II.

Phase III. This process began once the research subjects agreed to participate in a focus study group. The focus study group took place during the fall of 2011 via electronic technology-skype. Within two weeks of the focus study group being concluded, I transcribed the data from this focus study group. After the notes from the focus study group were written, it was sent to the participants so that they could ensure what was typed was accurate and how they intended to respond to specific questions. After this process was completed, I conducted an analysis of the data from the focus study group and phase III was completed.

Phase IV. During phase IV, I met (personally or electronically) with members from the dissertation committee in an effort to debrief and to make any corrections or revisions to any part of this project. It was important during this time to converse with my professors to discuss any emergent themes and seek additional guidance at this time. By early spring 2012, I conducted a peer debriefing with other researchers and colleagues in my dissertation-writing group. After this process was finalized, I commenced writing chapters 4 and 5 of this document during the fall 2012. It is my intent to submit my corrected dissertation to ETD by spring 2013.

Role of the Researcher

In naturalistic inquiry the researcher has the most prominent role in this process. This researcher crafted the questions and determines the scope of the research. This researcher affirmed that he had a considerable amount of biases for the school district studied. Because this researcher was an educator and believed in the ninth grade academy concept, he asserted his subjectivity to this topic and acknowledged that his objectivity may be biased. In an effort to eradicate the possibility that my interpretation of the data

might be slated, some procedures were implemented to maintain a consistent level of objectivity: member checks, bracketing, triangulation and debriefing sessions (with peers and mentors). The following concepts were strategies that this researcher utilized to minimize his subjectivity while performing this study.

Bracketing was a technique employed during research whereby the inquirer identified his ideas or beliefs so that they were not interpreted as part of the research. Triangulation simply stated were the multiple research methodologies utilized to resolve the studied phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Essentially to conduct a member check the researcher presented participants with a written copy of their answers to interview questions or their responses to a focus study meeting. At this point the researcher was attempted to ensure that he had an accurate assessment of what the participants said or how they intended to respond to a particular question (s). At that time any corrections or additions were made (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Consultation

All the data in this project was collected and analyzed by the researcher only. I identified several avenues at my disposal that were beneficial to me during this research process. I continuously communicated with the professors on my dissertation committee during this research and writing process. Moreover, I was a member of a dissertation-writing group in the Department of Leadership. I utilized these individuals to assist me to debrief after the observations, interviews and focus study groups. After I had my transcripts from the interviews, and notes from the observations, and focus study group, I had my peers-the doctoral students to analyze my documents to ensure clarity. The group verified that I had achieved saturation. Once my interviews with these instructional

leaders were completed, I engaged in member checks in an effort to ensure that I had captured an accurate assessment of what these individuals said and/or meant to have said during our time together.

Ethical and Political Considerations

At no point during this study did an instructional leader have an advantage over another individual or group. The data collected during this research process was kept in a secure location. All instructional leaders were asked to sign a consent form prior to their participation in this study. Prior to any face to face interview (s) and focused study groups, instructional leaders were reminded that their involvement was on a voluntary basis. During the research process no pertinent information about any instructional leader was disclosed to another person. Only the researcher had access to the notes from any observations, interviews, or focused study group. This researcher only revealed the data obtained from the research subjects to the professors on his dissertation committee. However, before any of this information was released to any of these members, both instructional leaders and sites were given a pseudonym in order to protect their confidentiality. Finally, any time direct quotes from any instructional leaders was used their identity was concealed.

The political considerations that surfaced as a result of this study manifested in terms of policies or procedures implemented at the district or school building levels. This study was vital in assisting district level administrators in adopting policies that were instrumental in impacting the number of students who drop-out of school at the ninth grade. This research was important in supporting building level instructional leaders in

creating procedures that incorporate ninth grade students into the life of the school, thus making it more unlikely that they drop-out.

Representation

This study was written using the notes from the observations, the transcripts from the interviews, and focus study group. I described the particulars of the instructional leadership at each ninth grade academy that was studied in this project as well as commonalities or significant differences that existed. Each case was specifically categorized individually. Any thematic depictions discerned from the data during this research process, which was consistent at both sites, was highlighted. My final representation of the data compiled from this study is in the form of a dissertation.

Chapter Summary

In chapter 3, I explained the case study methodology and how it was used in a naturalistic study. This chapter explained the criteria that I utilized to select the participants and sites for this research project. In this research project the three data collection methods employed were observations, interviews and a focus study group. In an effort to process data, I used debriefing sessions with my committee members as well as my peers in the Department of Leadership. After each of these collection methods transpired an intense data analysis was conducted. The possibility of risks and benefits to the individuals involved in this research project was revealed. I also highlighted any and all ethical concerns that surfaced.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter contains the findings and data analysis from the current study, which explores the experiences of two instructional leaders at two separate ninth grade academies. A synopsis of the research questions and the methodology employed are discussed in this chapter, along with the four themes identified during data analysis. The purpose of this case study was to explore the lived experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies and examine the processes and procedures that were utilized to eradicate the growing phenomena of freshmen dropping out of school. Since the existing literature did not address the experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies, there was no information highlighting the processes and procedures that instructional leaders implemented at such academies to facilitate students remaining in school and successfully matriculating through the ninth grade.

Description of Research Participants

The current study involved two instructional leaders at two different ninth grade academies from an urban school district in a southern U.S. city. Each instructional leader selected had from 3–10 years of experience. One of the participants was responsible for an academy with 457 students. At this particular school, 77% of the freshmen were considered to be economically disadvantaged. The other academy in this study had a freshman enrollment of 495 pupils. At this academy, only 10% of the freshman fit the federal classification of being economically disadvantaged. Each of the instructional leaders selected voluntarily participated in this study.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was conducted to answer one baseline question and was supported with four sub questions. The over arching research question that shaped this inquiry project was, “What are the experiences of two instructional leaders in implementing a ninth grade academy?” To collect data, I utilized observations, interviews, and a focus group session. Each sub question was written essentially in an effort to facilitate resolutions to the over arching question. Moreover, the sub questions in this research project were:

1. What were the experiences of instructional leadership at ninth grade academies and how did these leaders make meaning of these experiences?
2. What was the nature of instructional leadership at ninth grade academies?
3. What best practices, policies, and/or procedures were implemented at your ninth grade academy that impacted the small learning community model?
4. Describe the leadership attributes that you possessed that were instrumental in incorporating all stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, and teacher teams) in the implementation of the ninth grade academy?

Synthesis of the Findings from Data Collection

This section was inclusive of the data that been retrieved from two observations, three interviews and one focus study group of two instructional leaders at two different ninth grade academies. There were four themes that emerged from this empirical study after combing through the data multiple times. These four themes were: (1) collective experiences as opposed to a monolithic experience, (2) site-based decision making opposite a centralized decision-making environment, (3) the seclusion concept versus a

school-within-a-school model, and (4) an introverted leader rather than an extroverted leader. Each of these themes was explained from a social constructivism world perspective, which meant these instructional leaders attempted to make meaning of their situations based on their past and present lived experiences. Furthermore, these experiences significantly influenced the ways in which these instructional leaders implemented processes and procedures to effectively manage their respective academies. Another factor that was critical to their realities was the environment of these leaders and their respective academies.

Themes

This qualitative study was shaped by the four aforementioned research questions. Each research question was followed by a specific corresponding theme. Data from each research site was given in response to each research question. This pattern was followed throughout this section.

An *inductive* data analysis process was used in this study, whereas my perspective goes from a general focus to a more specific focus. Data were first grouped into many different categories and later purged into smaller groups. The next step was to organize these groups to a few specific areas that were assigned codes (referred to as “lean coding”). These codes were delineated according to the experiences of each instructional leader and identified as themes; this process is called “axial coding.” Each of the themes identified in the current study was connected with each guiding question.

Cornerstone of the Findings

To answer the research questions posed in the current study, I discovered four foundational pillars that shaped the ways research findings were recorded. I sifted

through the data to locate broader topics, used very specific categories (the four study themes): collective experiences as opposed to a monolithic experiences, site-based decision-making opposite a centralized decision-making environment, the seclusion concept versus a school-within-a-school model, and finally introverted rather than extroverted leadership. I probed through the data to identify characteristics distinct to each participant and site. I was interested in the number of students at each academy and how each school implemented the “small learning community” (SLC) concept. During data collection, both participants were asked about their school’s rationale for creating a ninth grade academy. Finally, each instructional leader was questioned about the techniques employed to create the instructional climate they desired in their building as well as the guiding philosophical construct(s).

Subsequently, I revealed the attributes of each instructional leader that contributed to their success at their respective academy. Each instructional leader was allowed to explain the qualities they have acquired and utilized to gain commitment from stakeholders of their respective academy. Specifically, I focused on their relationship(s) with students, parents and teachers. I combed the data to retrieve leadership qualities that these instructional leaders implemented daily to manage their schools efficiently and effectively.

Finally, I focused on intervention strategies that were instrumental in freshman students’ academic success at their ninth grade academies. Emphasis was placed on the instructional techniques that the selected instructional leaders employed to increase student achievement at their school. I also highlighted the strategies that each leader utilized to encourage positive and consistent parental involvement at their academies. I

analyzed the abilities of these leaders to solicit the support of community stakeholders to become positive advocates for their schools and students when academic benchmarks were achieved.

Alpha Academy: Eddie Robinson's Story

Mr. Eddie Robinson, a 35-year-old Black male, was the instructional leader at Alpha Academy. Mr. Robinson had only worked in his current school district and ascended through the ranks during his professional career at Alpha Academy to serve in different leadership capacities. Because he was once a foot soldier (teacher) at this ninth grade academy, Robinson was able to see the effectiveness of many of the interventions that were implemented at Alpha Academy and their impact on students' achievement.

Robinson detailed the experiences of developing a freshman academy the following way:

After examining research and observing the 9th-grade socialization with upper classmen, we decided that by separating the freshmen from the upper classmen we were able to establish a solid academic foundation, establish specific behavioral standards, and monitor more closely their attendance. Using separation and establishing all freshman classes and clubs, isolation became our strength.

Prior to becoming an instructional leader at Alpha Academy, Robinson concentrated primarily on his responsibilities as the head coach of the football and track teams. Due to his successful coaching career, Robinson used many of those principles to address the challenges that he faced as an instructional leader. When asked to explain how those skills were utilized as the instructional leader, Robinson described his decision-making process as:

...what one has to do as the instructional leader when problems surface was to see if the instructional program contributed to the existing situation, examine the causes and effects, and attempt to implement preventive strategies.

Robinson ascertained that the development of a ninth grade academy was predicated upon a viable partnership between school officials and community stakeholders. It was his contention that the instructional leader was essentially responsible for providing the best educational environment for all students. He stated that:

...establishing a ninth grade academy was exhilarating, in particular the ability to create and implement an educational concept that improved academic achievement, attendance, discipline, and graduation rate for 9th graders.

Theme 1: Monolithic Experience. After combing through the data involved with the first research question pertaining to the key experiences of instructional leaders, the first theme, “monolithic experience,” was detected. This theme explained how Robinson’s lived experiences as an instructional leader originated from one source. The impact that this individual had on Mr. Robinson’s life was so prolific that it shaped his professional life as well as the academy that he leads today.

For the scope of this case study, the experiences of these instructional leaders was inclusive of their influences to enter the educational arena as well as the impact that ninth grade academies had on student achievement. Robinson articulated that his decision to pursue a career in education was due to the positive impression that one individual, his high school football coach Mr. Mac, had on his life. Robinson indicated that he knew as early as high school that he wanted to be an educator. According to Robinson, “I knew I wanted to do the same [that Mr. Mac did] for other young people.” He added further that “Coach Mac cared about his athlete as people first, and athletics were a distant second. He taught us about life lessons by using sports, and that was something that always stayed with me.” As soon as Robinson’s athletic career ended in college, he got a job

teaching at the school that later became Alpha Academy. Prior to becoming the instructional leader at Alpha Academy, Robinson taught history and coached track at this high school for eight years. When conversations about finding a new instructional leader for Alpha Academy began, Robinson said, “I went to the new administrator and requested that my name be placed in the hat for consideration for the position.” Robinson also believed that relationships that he forged with his colleagues as a teacher were beneficial to him during this time: “I believed that it was a good thing that some of teachers in the Academy spoke to the new instructional leader and voiced their support for me as the leader of the ninth grade academy.”

Robinson stipulated that Coach Mac had a tremendous impact on him as a person and the lessons learned shaped his views as an instructional leader. Robinson further stated that:

I wanted to create an environment at Alpha Academy that I experienced when I was in high school. I wanted students to feel like they were cared for the way Coach Mac made us feel many years ago. Because I am not so far removed from poverty, neighborhoods that had gangs, and drugs, I had the opportunity to see the doors that education opened for me. I knew the value of education and how it allowed me to escape the misery of an improvised upbringing. Great coaches and strong men who came into my life model for me the right roads to travel and results of making good/healthy choices in life. As an educator I wanted to encourage and motivate young people that if they were willing to work hard that they too can have the desires of their hearts and that poverty was not an excuse or reason not to try to do better. So when I became the instructional leader at Alpha Academy that was one of my goals.

Since becoming the instructional leader at Alpha Academy, Robinson articulated a vision for the ninth grade academy:

...we (the staff) believed our focus should be to ease freshmen transition from middle to high school and to eliminate the pressures that come with going to high school. It (Alpha Academy) was the buffer zone where students were able to experience the rigors of high school while at the same time being protected in a

warm and nurturing environment.

When describing Alpha Academy, Robinson purported that while ninth graders were segregated, their experiences were similar to any high school. He stated that, “This is a school-within-a-school. It is no different from any other high school in this country; many of the problems that transpired at a traditional high school occur within the confines of Alpha Academy as well.” Historically, the disciplinary infractions that Robinson dealt with, he believed, were typical of all ninth graders regardless of the school that they attended “...checking (name-calling), horse playing, pushing, shoving, and running. These things escalate so fast until they ultimately result in discipline problems. The greatest problem was the immaturity level of the students at this age and grade level.” Robinson elaborated even more on this situation when he reported that:

...these infractions were compound because once the Instructional leader had to deal with these issues on a disciplinary referral the final outcome was usually that the child was being removed from class and then no learning was able to take place. The other component to this puzzle was when the student did return to class they were even further behind and were then in need of remediation and/or intervention.

Theme 2: Site-Based Decision-Making. The next theme, “site-based decision making,” answered the second research question pertaining to the nature of instructional leadership. I wanted to examine the motivations that triggered the decision to utilize ninth grade academies and where this verdict was rendered. I was curious to develop a better understanding of instructional leader Robinson’s involvement in this movement.

Robinson cited that his district’s justification for implementing a ninth grade academy had more to do with students’ lack of maturity and the high freshmen failure rates throughout the district rather than any other factors. Specifically, Robinson attested that:

After examining research and observing the 9th-grade socialization with upper classmen, we chose to establish a ninth grade academy. By separating the freshmen from the upper classmen we were able to establish a solid academic foundation, specific behavioral standards, and monitor more closely their attendance. Using separation and creating all freshman classes, and clubs, isolation became our strength. Their self-esteem was monitored and we could actually see growth in their academic abilities and school attendance. In relationship to their behavior, our strategy was to be firm, fair, and consistent, always allowing them to understand the consequences of bad behavior. Initially, suspensions were high, but once students learned what type of behavior that would be tolerated, the number leveled off and began to decrease. Overall, new academic standards gave way to higher test scores, and enrollment into more challenging subjects such as honors world geography, geometry, and foreign languages. With the inception of the Academy, subsequent 10th, 11th, and 12th graders improved in all areas with the largest graduating class in 11 years being the first Academy class to graduate.

Robinson was the instructional leader at Alpha Academy for three years. He assisted by 1 guidance counselor and 21 teachers, 15 assigned specifically to the ninth grade academy. When asked about the teaching experience of his staff, Robinson contended that Alpha Academy was consistent with the national trend:

Traditionally, the teachers who teach ninth graders were either novice to your building or fresh out of college attempting to learn the profession. The majority of the teachers here at the Academy have been teaching less than 10 years; I only have one seasoned person on staff.

He further added that "...the core nucleus of individuals who were at the Academy when I began as a teacher were still on staff." Robinson went on to clarify that during his tenure at Alpha Academy, "...the only teachers who left the school were those whose contracts I decided not to renew." Not only does he evaluate and supervise teachers, but Robinson was also ultimately responsible for each first-year freshmen on the campus. Robinson insisted that being an instructional leader at a ninth grade academy required that "...you learn early how to develop the skills necessary to be able to deal

with many different situations at the same time and be able to prioritize which one you had to address first.” Expounding on his duties, Robinson stated that the role of an:

instructional leader...required one to wear many hats (you are the Instructional leader, counselor, coach, friend, and father figure to mention a few categories) the biggest thing that I wanted to do was to make students comfortable with me regardless of which hat I was wearing.

Furthermore, he confirmed that in order to attain this goal, “I assisted students in achieving self-actualization, a process which was ongoing throughout the school year.”

According to Robinson:

This maturation process manifested itself through our attempt to get the students to be themselves. We stressed to our students that it was okay to be an individual and they did not have to try to fit in with others to the point where they lost their own identity.

Theme 3: Seclusion. The third theme, “seclusion,” was an example of a research-based best practice implemented at Alpha Academy. This theme answered the third research question pertaining to best practices, policies, and/or procedures. Robinson utilized certain practices at Alpha Academy to remedy the drop-out problem in his school district.

During Robinson’s interviews and observations, he described a myriad of strategies that were utilized in an effort to assist students at his school. In an effort to increase student achievement; he identified five strategies that were employed at Alpha academy: (1) enrichment classes, (2) gender classes, (3) seclusion, (4) a small student body, and (5) a transition program. While these were not all of the techniques used at Alpha academy, Robinson believed they were most beneficial to their program.

Alpha academy is nestled in a military community and was there for over seven decades. It was the only high school in the area and attracted students from neighboring

communities. At the time of study, Alpha Academy was served 457 ninth-grade students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Alpha Academy used the ninth grade academy concept for nine years, and was housed in a separate building from the rest of the campus. As a result, freshmen only interacted with upper-classmen on a limited basis (e.g., honors classes, vocation, and lunch). Robinson noted “common planning” as another beneficial intervention strategy. Specifically, Robinson asserted that “Common assessment and planning helped diminish the number of students who failed, while simultaneously strengthened the small learning community and increased parental presence in our building.”

Robinson reported that he dealt with all issues (discipline, attendance, and academics) involving ninth graders at the school. Historically, these issues have been hurdles that caused ninth graders to fail nationally (Hertzog & Morgan, 2001) and at Alpha Academy. In efforts to resolve this disastrous trend at Alpha Academy, Robinson stated that:

We saw the need for a 9th grade academy to tackle many of the problems that freshmen were encountering annually: retention, receiving more discipline referrals than any other classification of students, and habitual attendance issues. All of these challenges were interrelated, not one more important than the other, and each posed a significant dilemma impeding our students from passing to the 10th grade.

To reduce discipline issues, Robinson was adamant with his staff and parents about the imperativeness of keeping students engaged with activities at the school. This concept was crystallized by Robinson when he declared that:

We had to maintain extracurricular activities that reflected the interest of all students. This included clubs and organizations, team and individual sports, and other forms of entertainment. Statistics supported the fact that schools that had successful sport teams and college preparatory programs had very low drop-out numbers. Successful schools tend to have a strong and challenging academic

program, along with successful extra curricula activities.

Robinson avowed, "...it was my intent to foster an environment that was conducive to learning for the staff and children in the building." According to him, this began the first day of school when:

Teachers were encouraged to greet students at their door. This provided for supervision between class transitions. Students knew upon arriving in the class that this was a place of business and that they were wanted. They needed to have [teachers] greet them as they entered the classroom. It eased any anxiety from other classes or from home. We wanted children to know that they were in a setting where they were cared for and were safe. The classrooms needed to be neat, orderly, and display students' achievements, and work either in the classroom or in close proximity in the hallway. Teachers were encouraged to get to know their students as individuals, not just as a person occupying a seat in the classroom. This meant if a student was involved in sports or other extra curricula activities, go to the event to support the child. We want to know what their interests and hobbies were in an attempt to engage them in conversations that served as a catalyst for instructions that will or took place in class.

To create an environment that was conducive to learning, Robinson and his staff commenced early each school year; as a matter of fact, the process was put in place in the summer of the freshman year. A one-day orientation, called "Destination Graduation Day," was conducted for all incoming ninth graders. Robinson described this activity as "an event-filled day whereby ninth graders were acclimated with the expectations and rigors of Alpha Academy." He asserted that "...this 7 1/2-hour transitional program was designed for our incoming freshmen. We incorporated break-out sessions that deal specifically with the issues that have historically caused ninth graders problems in high school." Robinson went on to elaborate that another unique facet of this festive occasion was the fact that:

We incorporated our students who had matriculated through the Academy as guides. This provided the in-coming freshmen with the opportunity to ask questions and hear experience(s) from individuals who successfully navigated

through the process the previous year that these children are about to undertake.

While Destination Graduation Day appeared to be an isolated activity, the staff at Alpha Academy worked during the school year to make this event a success. Robinson noted that he and his staff annually attended the promotional days of each of their feeder schools to encourage children to attend and solicited the parental involvement for the upcoming Destination Graduation Day. Robinson acknowledged that on these promotional days, “I invited all future ninth graders to attend Alpha Academy’s ‘Destination Graduation Day.’ Each eighth grader was given a brief data sheet to fill-out prior to leaving and promised a t-shirt if they attended the event.” He affirmed that Destination Graduation Day was utilized for other purposes as well. Because the freshmen who matriculated at Alpha Academy attended rival middle schools for the last three years, they had to be taught how to work together. Robinson said, “We utilized this festive occasion to develop team-building skills that were essential throughout the coming school year.” Robinson discussed other assets at his disposal to foster teamwork among students. This concept became obvious when Robinson asserted that:

...we found that our athletic program also did a fantastic job of building a sense of cohesion for some of the children who came to our school from different middle schools. ...we emphasized the importance of how sports built a sense of unity in our students. In addition, our honor classes facilitated to build some productive teamwork and healthy competition. Many children who were gifted in their middle school were making friends with students from different middle schools that they did not know and built cohesion simultaneously.

For those students not performing at their grade level, the Alpha Academy staff had intervention programs in place. Robinson described the systemic approach utilized at Alpha Academy as:

We (special education (SPED) teachers, counselors, and myself) monitored students’ academic achievement and/or the lack thereof. We attempted to track

this early, and it was based on individual assessment. We identified students who were susceptible to dropping out, monitored their attendance and studied their academic patterns, and then provided them with a support team that included a grade level administrator, and counselor, and an at-risk counselor. For those students who were failing, we communicated with their classroom teacher. Then we informed the parents of children who were failing. The next step was to educate the parent about the services that were available that might be of some assistance in helping the student to be successful. We built into our schedule an Advisory period twice a week, which was a 40-minute block of time (Tuesdays and Thursdays) designed to target students who were struggling academically. They were required to attend remediation in the subject areas they struggled in the most.

Robinson affirmed that he found a dual purpose for his Advisory period. He declared that the “Advisory period helped struggling students through the efforts of remediation and tutoring; however, those students who were performed on grade level and passed their classes, this time was utilized to socialize by participating in clubs and intramural sports.” Robinson expounded extensively on other opportunities that the Academy devised to ensure that students were academically successful.

Robinson commented on a pilot program recommended by his staff that was new to Alpha Academy and a novelty to his district—same-gender physical education classes. This concept derived from the varying levels of physical development and athletic ability of ninth grade boys and girls. Simply stated, Robinson noted “...that many girls would not participate in the physical education classes because they could not compete with the boys and not all of the guys were able to compete on the same level.” In order to reduce the competition level and have all the children more comfortable the staff petitioned Robinson to implement a same gender Physical Education class. Robinson surmised the situation as:

The physical education teachers expressed a concern that many students were not earning all of their credit because they were not dressing out and participating. This was an idea that was generated by the teachers. Girls were complaining that

the boys were too aggressive in sporting activities. There were hormonal issues between the sexes. There was a lot of built-in tension and stresses between the sexes in these classes. The same gender classes started this school year (August 2010), and so far we have only heard good reviews from the teachers and students about this program.

While these initiatives were instrumental in improving students' academic performance, the staff at Alpha Academy employed other intervention strategies to improve students' learning and school attendance such as co-teaching, and student-based incentives. He stated that:

...co-teaching (the pairing of a regular and special education teacher in one classroom) was very effective at the Academy. It was done in science, math, and English classes. Each subject had an end-of-course test associated with it. These teachers worked collaboratively to ensure that differentiated instruction occurred so that different students' learning styles and academic levels were addressed. We took advantage of our technological capabilities and the children's mastery of it.

Robinson commented that "...technology was used (smart boards and hands-on manipulatives) in co-teaching classes to address various learning styles and attempts to reach all of the students regardless of their cognitive level." He and his administrative colleagues at the high school were instrumental in exposing students to experiences beyond the walls of the schoolhouse. Specifically, Robinson stated that his team at Alpha Academy "developed relationships with corporate and community businesses to solicit them to sponsor gift cards to be utilized as incentives for students' who were attending school regularly and achieving good grades." Robinson noted that:

...we have an incentive program as an inducement to get students to come to school. They were recognized for perfect attendance or student of the month in the area of attendance. Those students who won were rewarded with gift cards for coming to school every day. We [the staff] believe that attendance had a direct effect on academics. For those who were not attending school, calls were made to inquire as to why they were not coming to school. What we have found was that when children did not come to school there were usually some [more significant] issues at home. I spearheaded this with the assistance from my at-risk counselor,

guidance counselor, and the attendance secretary. The school held conferences with parents to uncover the reason[s] why children were not attending school.

Another intervention strategy implemented during the school year that Robinson spoke highly of was the “Zeros Are Not Acceptable Do” (ZANDO) the work program. Robinson commented that this idea originated from a large number of high school students failing because they simply refused to submit the class assignments which resulted in a poor promotion rate. Robinson explicitly described his position on this program as:

We tried to redefine our expectation for our students and culture here at the school with the adoption of the ZANDO program. We were not going to allow a student just not to submit an assignment. A list of students who had not submitted work was generated. Once a student failed to turn in five assignments they forfeited their ‘Advisory Time.’ During this time, these students had to go to their teacher’s classroom and made up work that was not submitted rather than participate in club activities. Failure was not an option. Late work was accepted 2 weeks after the due date with 80% of credit. This project started this school year [August 2010]. Students were more conscious about doing their assignments because they wanted Advisory Time. There was an increase in the number of assignments that was submitted this year, and the numbers of zeros were down this year. The majority of the teachers were on board with this project even though it created more work for them.

Theme 4: Introverted Leadership. The fourth theme uncovered in the current study was “introverted leadership,” which answered the final research question about leadership attributes possessed by the instructional leader. In this last section, I illustrated how this self-proclaimed “introvert” employed the leadership skills in his toolbox to incorporate stakeholders at Alpha Academy.

Robinson, a quiet, mild-mannered individual, described himself by stating:

I am an introvert, however being an at a ninth grade academy, you have to be a people person and outgoing, you become the cheerleader for the school and children. So when I entered these doors I take on another persona.

Robinson specifically identified five leadership qualities in his leadership toolbox that helped him involve stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, and students) in the ninth grade academy concept at his school. These five qualities were: (1) relationship-building, (2) open, two-way communication, (3) being supportive, (4) developing teamwork, and (5) visibility. Robinson mentioned that each of these characteristics were equally noteworthy and that neither was more prominent than another. When dealing with parents, the leadership qualities that Robinson realized he had to deploy if stakeholders were going to be involved were building positive relationships, developing teamwork, and creating open, two-way communication.

Robinson indicated that in order for students to achieve academic success, “the effort had to be proactive and combined between the school and the home.” He mentioned that educators were responsible for developing positive relationships with parents if the Academy was to function properly. He was quick to identify that at Alpha Academy, active and consistent parental involvement was an essential pillar for students’ academic success. This involvement covered the entire spectrum, ranging from academics, clubs, and organizations to discipline issues and athletics. His philosophy regarding this tenet was best captured when he said:

Parental involvement was crucial, especially in the Academy. The majority of the research pointed to the fact that as children progress through school, parental involvement decreases. On the contrary, the same level of involvement if not more was needed in high school. Students do not drop-out in grades 1 through 8; they usually drop-out in grades 9 through 12.

From that position, Robinson has attempted to work from a philosophical belief regarding parental involvement and its impact on his school, which he described in the following manner:

We commenced with all of our effort to keep parents informed. What we found out was that many of the students' (who struggle academically) parents never knew about this situation until it was beyond the point where anything could have been done. We made every effort to equip the parents with all of the tools that they need in an effort for them to best help their children. We kept a list of students who were struggling academically (SPED and non-SPED). We made an earnest endeavor to educate our parents regarding the resources that were available to them. Once the parents were informed, we asked them to work with us to better serve their children. The biggest thing that I wanted to push was that if our children were to be successful there had to be open dialogue between the school and parent[s]. We used every avenue at our disposal to access those lines of communication via phone calls, letters, and emails.

In addition to these things that occurred during the normal school day, Alpha Academy also offered academic support on the weekend in the form of Saturday school. Through direct communications with parents, this service was effective in increasing the GPAs of many students. Robinson also stated that his staff invited parents to the school to celebrate their child's achievements during the school year. Robinson elaborated on this topic even further when he cited the following examples:

...movie nights (with the assistance of the PTSA) and honor assemblies were held for parents of students who earned the honor roll. Students were recognized for their hard work in the classroom. There was a big participation of ninth graders in the honors night.

When asked about specific qualities he possessed that helped to create an atmosphere where quality instructions and higher order thinking were prevalent, Robinson was very transparent. He asserted, "I had to be supportive of teachers and a good listener in addition to being the instructional leader." Robinson was purposeful in modeling a behavior where teachers were comfortable enough to work without restraints and teaching and learning were paramount. Robinson contended that he was:

...pro-teacher, which meant for [him] that teachers had all the materials necessary to educate children, all barriers and obstacles that inhibited students from learning (discipline problems, lack of supplies, or any number of things) were eliminated from the equations. I believed that all educators should have children's

best interest at heart at all times. I believed in creating an atmosphere where students as well as teachers were open and free to approach me to express their concerns. Finally, I wanted to establish a culture of trust where all of this can flourish.

He described the particular leadership subsets and best practices that he implemented daily to establish an environment that was conducive for children to be successful as "...being visible, working hard, displaying compassion for every individual in the building, and holding all stakeholders accountable." This was seen daily at Alpha Academy. Habitually, Mr. Robinson was observed at 6:20 in the morning walking the halls in preparation for teachers and students. This was done to:

...make sure everybody was prepared for the day. If there were substitute teachers in the building, ensure that they had what they needed to be successful for the day. I had to monitor substitutes and attendance daily; I wanted to make sure everybody was in school and ready to start. Then the bulk of my morning was devoted to handling discipline referrals that were left from the previous day. I tried to address those referrals as early as possible and always before lunch. I handled 9th grade lunch, the second half of the day I concentrated on visiting classrooms to observe teachers and students. I prioritized events as they occurred and constantly ask myself if this was something that had to be dealt with immediately or could be handled at a later time?

Robinson concluded, "For the most part, teachers were very receptive to this approach." He surmised, "It was my belief that as long as the instructional leader established the tone and gave guidance to teachers then the majority were willing follow . . . there will always be a small minority."

He also affirmed that "If I want the staff to be nurturers of our children, then I had to model that expectation." This position required Robinson to implement all five of his listed attributes when dealing with students at Alpha Academy. Robinson recognized the fact that he had to be the example (in terms of establishing a relationship with students)

that he wanted to see in his teachers and staff. In an effort to develop a positive rapport with students in his building, Robinson was cognizant of his actions when he stated that:

It was a positive interaction that I wanted with students. Students associated me with authority, being just, consistent, firm, and fair with them even when there were discipline issues involved. I wanted to be open with students. I believed I needed to be visible and when I had to issue consequences to a student it was done with firmness, consistency, and a smile. I made an effort to relate to the students. I wanted to find something that students were interested in and learn enough about the topic to speak on it intelligently. If I had knowledge that students were interested in, then this broke barriers that existed between students/educators.

Special K Academy: Exemplary Eva's Story

Exemplary Eva is a middle-aged African American female; she is married with two adult children and four grandchildren. She is a seasoned educator in twilight of her professional career who openly discusses the realities of her retirement and the cyclical reform movements in education that she has experienced. Ironically, Exemplary Eva describes her career in education as a “full circle.” She began teaching in a small rural school district in the mid-1960s in a one-building school. Although she prepares to retire, she is currently the instructional leader at a ninth grade academy, which is a small learning community (SLC) housed in one large building.

She served in numerous leadership capacities in the school district prior to becoming the instructional leader at Special K Academy. Discussing her experiences as an instructional leader, Exemplary Eva captured the moment as:

...being an instructional leader in an urban school has been very rewarding. With the incorporation of smaller learning communities in high schools, ninth grade academies have become an integral part of the school culture in our district. Most importantly, as instructional leaders we were tasked by central office administrators with the implementation and coordination of the ninth grade academy model. Specifically at Special K Academy, we wanted to implement activities that created a sense of belonging and camaraderie among our students.

According to Exemplary Eva, creating a ninth grade academy required a great deal of collaboration between the building principal and all stakeholders involved in educating children. She ascertained that it entailed a commitment from teachers that typically goes beyond what many were accustomed to. The ninth grade academy concept called for coordinated effort from a team of teachers in which they dialogued, brainstormed, and found resolutions to concerns regarding students' behavior and academic progress. Exemplary Eva contended that this communal connection was vital to the development of young people who will have to make healthy life choices. Exemplary Eva concluded our discussion by saying, "I must admit that I have found this to be a daunting task and sometimes extremely challenging; however, I hope to see improvement in the drop-out rate in this class of 2012." After spending time with Exemplary Eva, I was better able to understand the benefits of the ninth grade academy and specifically the work done at Special K Academy.

Black (2004) stated that ninth grade academies should create a learning environment that smoothly acclimated freshmen to the transition from middle school to high school. While many school districts were seeking the next silver bullet model to combat the problems of freshman students dropping out of school, Special K Academy was hanging its hat on the efforts of Exemplary Eva and as well as the ninth grade academy concept. Her characterization of the mental dilemma that ninth graders experienced by stating:

Adolescents were undergoing the difficult transition from middle school to high school. As they faced social, emotional, physical, and intellectual challenges, it was easy for them to feel overwhelmed, confused, and alone. Because of these difficulties, the comfort created by ninth grade academy was the difference in

many students graduating or not.

When questioned about why she believed there was need for this model and why it worked, Exemplary Eva stated:

I believe many students, specifically those in their first year of high school, drop-out because of little support or positive reinforcement outside of school. These students needed a caring, consistent, disciplined, and engaging school environment. They needed to be challenged and encouraged to learn and to stay in school. Helping students to achieve success in the ninth grade will go a long way toward solving the drop-out problem and ensuring brighter futures for at-risk students.

Theme 1: Collective Experience. During data analysis of the first research question pertaining to instructional leaders' key experiences, the theme of "collective experience" emerged. This theme clarified how Eva's lived experiences as an instructional leader derived from multiple sources. Exemplary Eva acknowledged that the instructional leader she became resulted from the influence of several significant individuals and experiences throughout her life.

Eva vividly described her experiences as an instructional leader as "...a daily grind due to the volatility of freshmen; it was not a job for all educators." During the second interview with Exemplary Eva, I asked her to describe her experiences as an instructional leader in more detail. She replied with:

Exhausting! You start early in the morning, and the day doesn't end until dark. However, it was rewarding to watch students mature into positive young adults. I am ultimately responsible for the curriculum needs of all the children and disseminating consequences to any referred to the office. I observed all the teachers in the building and provided professional development for them as well. Moreover, I made it a point to informally observe at least two teachers per day.

After spending time with Exemplary Eva, I uncovered her reasons for going into the field of education and the experiences she amassed to become the educator she has become, discovering that a combination of things compelled her to do so. Exemplary

Eva's career covered three decades. According to Eva, "I pursued my degree in education after I was awarded a \$100.00 scholarship to attend college." While her decision to become an educator was by happenstance, the effect that other educators had on her life was deliberate and direct. Moreover, the goal of acquiring formal education was impressed upon Eva at an early age by her parents (both of whom were educators) and also extended family members (several were either educators or involved in education in other ways). When asked to identify the most influential educator (unrelated to her) in her life, Exemplary Eva's response was:

After reflecting on the instructional leaders in my family, there have been people in the educational field who left positive imprints on my life. It was difficult to single out one teacher who impacted my life, as there were several.

However, as a result Exemplary Eva did highlight a few educators who collectively contributed to the instructional leader she has become:

Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Miller were instrumental in guiding my path through the education field. They monitored my grades, encouraged me to do well. Coach Roberts taught me the importance of having integrity and character. I was impressed by Drs. Wilson and Gaithers, who taught me how to be thorough in research and the significance of positioning my beliefs in research that was sound and documentable. Mrs. Pillow and Mrs. Jackson taught me how to be disciplined in life and in pursuit of my educational aspirations. These people presented excellent mentoring experiences for me and I developed lasting friendships. Everything about them impressed me, and I wanted to incorporate pieces of their personalities into the teacher that I would become.

Finally, Exemplary Eva explained the experiences that brought her the most pain while simultaneously motivated her to become the instructional leader she is today. Even after Special K Academy was developed, Exemplary Eva acknowledged that:

One of my greatest disappointments was not being able to rescue those children who decided to quit school. Every year, regardless of what safeguard we would put in place, this vicious cycle continued, and one of my babies would succumb to it.

A despondent Exemplary Eva further described this sequence:

There was usually a gradual erratic attendance pattern, which fed into numerous excessive tardies (to school or individual classes) and/or an abundant number of unexcused absences from school. Coupled with this problem were failing grades and/or poor test scores. The final piece to this puzzle was the frequent number of discipline referrals for these students; either they skipped classes or disrupted them when they showed up at school because they could not comprehend what was going on in class.

When discussing this process of students dropping out of school, the pain of this loss was visible on Exemplary Eva's face; however, her winning spirit became obvious when she pointed out that, "During my four years at Special K Academy, we worked tirelessly to reduce the number of children lost in this revolving annual cycle."

Exemplary Eva beamed with delight as she proclaimed that since she has been at Special K Academy, incremental progress was observed in the students:

More students achieved the honor roll each six weeks. Our freshmen attendance rate improved each year. Ironically enough, we had more students than ever involved in extracurricular activities and even fewer cited on disciplinary referrals. I am convinced that collectively these factors were all attributable to the nurturing we did in Special K Academy.

Theme 2: Central Decision Making. The next theme, "central decision making," answered the second research question concerning the nature of instructional leadership. This theme evolved from the quest to better understand exactly what instructional leadership was at a ninth grade academy. In addition to this, I wanted to comprehend the origin of the driving force to create these small learning communities. Finally, I was interested in Exemplary Eva's role in this entire process.

In the centralized decision making continuum, only a selected few individual (usually those at the top of the organizational hierarchy) were responsible for developing ideas, and then the decision was disseminated throughout the organization. The nature of

instructional leadership at Special K Academy manifested from this process. While Exemplary Eva was instrumental in shaping the current vision of the academy, she had no input regarding the decision to create the school.

Exemplary Eva revealed that the rationale for creating freshmen academies was an idea that developed in the central office as a solution to the drop-out crisis that plagued her school district. According to Exemplary Eva, the district had a five-year plan, which was the adoption of the SLC concept of ninth grade academies. Exemplary Eva surmised that:

Once it was clear that this small learning community reform movement was going to be implemented in our district, the leadership team at Special K Academy went to work. We analyzed students' academic achievement along with the current research that was available regarding the national failure rate at the ninth grade level. So we decided to be proactive and made the decision to launch a pilot academy for our district. As a staff, we assembled together to develop a vision of what we thought the purpose of our ninth grade academy would encompass.

Exemplary Eva surmised that their purpose for creating a ninth grade academy had to be inclusive of the following ideas:

The academy increased student accountability, while at the same time it needed to strengthen their academic abilities and helped develop social engagement. At Special K Academy, we encouraged our students to participate in extracurricular activities, hoping that this would teach them to be more positive and exhibit responsible behavior. We were of the opinion that if we could create an environment where children wanted to come to school (increase their attendance), then we could teach them more, which would result in proficient increases on all state assessments, happier children, and a pleasant school climate. If we accomplished these objectives, then the ultimate goal, which was to increase our four-year graduation rate, would be a simpler task.

Exemplary Eva continued to describe her responsibilities as an instructional leader, saying that her day began like that of any other instructional leader at a public high school. Her emphasis was on creating an environment at Special K Academy that was warm, nurturing, and conducive to learning. When Exemplary Eva was asked to

describe the role of an instructional leader at a ninth grade academy, she explained, “I am the person who must establish the learning culture that motivate children, keep them engaged in the learning process, and make them fully comfortable in participating in extra curricula activities.” Exemplary Eva’s passion for her job and children was apparent as I observed her patrolling the halls and whisking students to their next destination before the tardy bell rang. She vividly described her daily goal in the following manner:

As students entered the building and throughout the day, I monitored the halls between and during classes to ensure order and an appropriate decorum was maintain. All teachers were required to stand in doorways to assist students’ transitions from one class period to the other. What I have found was that adult's presence eliminates possible altercations and horse playing which was typical for this age-group.

Theme 3: School-Within-a-School Concept. The third theme, “school-within-a-school,” was an example of a research-based best practice that was implemented at Special K Academy. This theme answers the third research question pertaining to best practices, policies, and/or procedures implemented. This section highlighted best practices, policies, and/or procedures utilized by Exemplary Eva at Special K Academy to resolve the drop-out dilemma that her district was faced with.

This instructional leader listed five strategies were (1) common planning, (2) school-within-a-school, (3) student incentives, (4) school looping, and (5) a transition program at Special K that facilitated an effective implementation of the ninth grade academy. During Exemplary Eva’s interviews and observations, she mentioned strategies that were developed to facilitate student achievement at her academy. While the items listed were not inclusive of all the reforms that were implemented at Special K Academy they were the ideas that Exemplary Eva contended were most helpful to her program.

Special K Academy, is located in a middle-class community in a southern city, was erected in 1905, and has a rich tradition in its community. This academy, which is considered a school-within-a-school, is at a traditional high school containing grades 9–12 and has a student population of 1,924. During the school year, the northeast wing of the building is specifically for freshman classes; these students are divided into teams in which they have the same core subject area teachers. The Academy has 1 guidance counselor and 20 teachers assigned exclusively to the ninth grade academy. Currently, Special K Academy has 495 ninth-grade students.

After hours of meeting with Exemplary Eva, I asked her to discuss specific best practices, policies, and procedures that facilitated students' achievement. She indicated that she thought the impetus of her district to initiate ninth grade academies was because it wanted to:

...create learning environments to assist freshmen with the transition from middle to high school that were nurturing and supportive. Instructional leaders were charged with attempting to empower youth with the social and academic skills needed to prepare them for high school. We tried to meet the students where they were, which oftentimes meant implementing differentiated instruction.

After the interview, it was clear to me that the staff at Special K Academy made a conscious effort to foster an atmosphere that was nurturing and that resembled a middle-school setting. When asked about this hypothesis, Exemplary Eva indicated that:

these adolescents were undergoing the difficult transition from middle to high school . . . social, emotional, physical, and intellectual challenges of this stage of development it was easy for them to feel overwhelmed and alone so we attempted to make every effort to develop a setting where they were comfortable.

The concept of transitioning was a best practice that has received an enormous amount of attention from high school reformers. When Exemplary Eva was asked how she and her staff approached this concept, her response was very detailed. As the

instructional leader at a ninth grade academy, “it was essential to establish the culture that I wanted to prevail in the building early,” asserted Exemplary Eva. Because this was a new program, Exemplary Eva was responsible for training her staff about the nuances pertaining to freshmen academies. Exemplary Eva described the process in the following way:

First, teachers met for in-service professional development presented by the principal, counselor, and selected teachers. We developed two teams consisting of the core subjects. We discussed the objectives and rationale for the inception of this program. The mission and vision for all freshmen academies were developed by the district.

To achieve the desired climate at Special K Academy, steps were formulated during the summer prior to school commencing. Exemplary Eva and her staff planned a three-week freshmen orientation seminar called “The Bridge Program.” The staff was able to disseminate the information regarding this program through the district’s public relations department, radio public announcements, flyers, and advertisements in the local newspapers. All students were required to read a novel, conduct science lab projects, and create a PowerPoint presentation that was presented orally to parents and invited guests at the end of the program. Also during “The Bridge Program” students and parents were educated about the opportunities that were available for students attending Special K Academy. The Special K staff attempted to resolve many of the problems they expected to occur once the school year began. According to Exemplary Eva, “While the work was extensive to establish The Bridge Program, the time requirements necessary to facilitate an effective program during the school year was twice as consuming.” The Special K team had interventions in place as “safety nets” to catch children who were at-risk of failing once the year started. Exemplary Eva stressed the desire to construct a three-tier

design that incorporated factors involving at-risk students' academic performance, attendance, and parents. According to Exemplary Eva, the program worked in the following manner:

Teachers monitored students' attendance closely and contacted parents immediately when a student was absent from school more than two consecutive days. Parent link [which is an automated system] called parents daily if a student missed the prescribed number of days from any class. Students were given the opportunity to sign up for credit recovery or e-learning [web based] to make-up failed course work and take new courses for credit after-school. These were a few strategies we had in place to help at-risk students graduate with their peers.

Furthermore, I was interested to discover what, if any, specific procedures or techniques were developed that had a positive impact at Special K Academy. Again, Exemplary Eva was delighted to discuss the work of her staff. While Exemplary Eva and her staff's fundamental concern was the instructional achievement of their children, they wanted to implement operational structures to assist in the development of their students. This was done with the advent of their advisory program. Exemplary Eva described it as a:

...weekly one-hour session facilitated by the guidance counselor during homeroom. The material covered during these seminars was a mixture of character education, study skills, and workbook tutorials from the book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. These sessions were great for building teamwork among students and for developing rapport between students and staff as well as provide opportunities for mentoring.

Exemplary Eva asserted that Special K Academy developed many of these best practices when it was established. Exemplary Eva stated, "Teachers had common time planning, and students were assigned to core classes in groups." She described this concept in the following manner: "Teachers met with their teams at least once (preferably more) a week where they focused on developing lesson plans, addressing problems regarding discipline, attendance and academic deficiencies of individual students." In

addition to these strategies, she revealed that “Students were given double doses of classes in the subject where the previous year their standardized test scores were below proficiency.” Exemplary Eva indicated that:

We did these things as a means to better handle and identify those students who were struggling academically and be in a better position to give them the assistance they needed before they started to fail. This could only be effectively done by having common planning time for teams of teachers in the Academy.

Exemplary Eva also mentioned that the common planning and team meetings were instrumental in revamping instructions when we discovered that children were struggling to comprehend concepts taught or when some students became discipline problems.”

Exemplary Eva highlighted several initiatives that Special K Academy had implemented during her tenure that made a positive impact on the school’s culture. She indicated that the staff wanted students to take ownership of the school, so they started with simple things. To generate a welcoming environment, Eva stated, “We designed and purchased a banner with the school’s name on it that hung at the entrance of the Academy.”

Exemplary Eva commented that we, “posted pictures throughout the Academy of athletes and the student leadership team, while the student of the week was acknowledge over the intercom, their picture and biography were posted outside the main office.”

Exemplary Eva ascertained that these measures were instrumental in addressing academic and discipline issues and securing parental involvement. She summarized that she and her staff concluded early that if the ninth grade academy concept was going to be successful, they “had to get parents actively and positively involved in the school.” We attempted to bombard our parents with as much information as possible about our school. Eva stated that an example of Special K Academy’s attempt to fulfill this goal was its parents’ newsletter: “It was mailed to the home of record and electronically sent to every student’s

parent quarterly.” She stated, “On more than one occasion, we attempted to think outside of the box to get parents to come to our school.”

Exemplary Eva conceded the fact that even after the academy had been instituted, the staff had to meet regularly to deal with students’ issues. Exemplary Eva admitted that:

Common planning time (period of specific and pre-determined time that is set-aside for a team of teachers meet to discuss instructional strategies and methodological approaches to teaching and learning) was also utilized as professional development sessions for her teachers to discuss specific attributes of small learning communities.

She declared, “Students’ data were used as the foundational piece for the decisions that were made at our school.” Exemplary Eva elaborated even further about how SLCs were utilized to impact student achievement at Special K when she stated:

Because we had the common planning time concept in place, it allowed teachers to meet consistently at a predetermine interval with the intent to make decisions after they had disaggregated student data to implement changes in instructions, and develop action plans to target students’ deficiencies individually and collectively as a school.

Although these strategies were instrumental in making significant positive gains in student achievement at Special K Academy; failure and disappointment were present each year as well.

Theme 4: Extroverted Leadership. The fourth theme in this research project was “extrovert leader,” and it derived from a conversation in which Exemplary Eva described herself. This theme answered the fourth research question pertaining to leadership attributes that each instructional leader possessed. With this question, I wanted to determine the traits that Exemplary Eva utilized that were instrumental in involving all stakeholders of Special K Academy.

When asked about the leadership attributes that were vital to the implementation of the SLC at her school, Exemplary Eva reported:

In essence, the attributes (building relationships, honest and courageous communications, being visible, providing vision and/or guidance through coaching) which I possessed that were instrumental in incorporating stakeholders into the life-line of our school were the same with each group but implemented differently based upon the situation.

Exemplary Eva expounded even further on this topic when she affirmed that “Creating, sustaining, and/or working at a ninth grade academy required a great deal of collaboration between all the stakeholders involved in the education of children.” For this to be successful Exemplary Eva identified five leadership attributes that was utilized at Special K Academy. These attributes included visibility, relationship building, coaching people, communication, and establishing expectations.

Exemplary Eva and her staff illustrated their desire to have parents visit Special K Academy. They offered rewards to students whose parents came to the school for positive reasons. Exemplary Eva elaborated on this position when she stated that we,

...had homework nights where we taught parents what was actually being taught in the classroom. It was our position that we were eliminating barriers and educating our parents about the academic needs of their children. I think building relationships was very important. At Special K Academy, it was our conviction to develop situations that assisted us in building positive and healthy relationships with our parents before any problems surfaced which was essential, to winning all future battles.

Exemplary Eva affirmed that parental involvement was fundamental to Special K Academy's core values and that a special allocation was in the school's budget to support the hiring of a parental liaison. This liaison was responsible for coordinating meetings between parents and teachers and creating events that encouraged parents' presence at the school. Exemplary Eva asserted that at Special K Academy, emphasis was placed on

having activities that attracted parents to the school. For example, she highlighted the fact that:

We scheduled parents' meetings each semester. After every marking period there was an academic awards program as well as a freshman sports banquet in the spring for our ninth-grade athletes. We made it a point to invite community leaders to speak when we had our "Muffins for Moms" and "Donuts with Dads" day every year.

Exemplary Eva characterized herself as a loquacious person. She reported to be a "people's person with the perfect job because I get paid to engage daily with people from 14–60+ year of age. Some days there were some pretty interesting and thought-provoking conversations." To get children involved in their education, Exemplary Eva said, "My ability to converse with them has helped me immensely." She stated that "Once children know you care and that you will be honest with them, they were receptive to your message." She ascertained that she attempted to have courageous conversations with her students only after she had cemented a relationship with them. Many of these conversations occurred in the halls of Special K Academy. When asked why she was so adamant about being in the halls during students' transition, Exemplary Eva proclaimed, "That allowed me to monitor both teachers and students through observation."

A persistent mantra that Exemplary Eva recited was "Teachers and students will know what is important to you by your actions and words." This was a point of view that she utilized with teachers and students during the implementation of this SLC concept at Special K Academy. While observing I witnessed her desire to be visible. This became obvious moments before the bells rang for students to change classes Exemplary Eva instinctively stopped what she was doing and perched in the halls. Her rationale for this obsessive behavior was due in part to her beliefs that "controlling students' behavior

during class transition was crucial because many discipline problems occurred in the halls during this time.” In her efforts to manage these behaviors, Exemplary Eva acknowledged that “this is done early in the school year by establishing positive relationships with as many children as possible.” Throughout the interview with Exemplary Eva, we began a discourse regarding her relationship with the children in her building. She emphatically stipulated that she attempted to “operate from a stance that was firm, consistent, and impartial.” This position was crystallized when Exemplary Eva stated, “What educators have to remember when dealing with school-aged children was be consistent and fair. I believe that children perform better when they know what was expected of them.” Her approach as an instructional leader when applying this technique at Special K Academy was carried out in the following manner:

I liked to show students that school was fun when they followed the rules. I joked with them between classes while ushering them along, and always made time for them to come talk to me about issues. I made it a point to remember students’ names as much as possible. As they passed in the halls, I exchanged greetings with them. I am very stern, but I use logic to communicate the expectations and consequences. I corrected misbehavior and encouraged good behavior. I held students to high expectations and treated them fairly.

When interacting with educators, Exemplary Eva noted that the leadership qualities she employed were “being visible, setting expectations, and modeling expected behaviors.” In addition to this, Exemplary Eva commented that she now understood that to get anything done in the building, it was imperative that the instructional leader developed and maintained positive relationships with teachers. This was best described when she stated that:

I welcomed teachers as they entered the building. My experience has taught me that a systemic approach to school operations helped teachers and students. Everybody knows what the expectations were, and there were not any surprises.

For example, parents know that suspensions were cleared (Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.) and cell phones returned Tuesdays (2:15 p.m.-3:15 p.m.).

Throughout my observations of and interviews with Exemplary Eva, she reiterated the importance of the instructional leader setting the tempo in the building. After three thorough interviews and two intensive observations of Exemplary Eva at Special K Academy, she summarized the impact of her leadership attributes when dealing with stakeholders during the implementation of ninth grade academies in the following manner: “Once relationships were established, if the instructional leader was visible, has delineated the expectations, and has open communications with all the stakeholders, all other challenges were successfully addressed as a team.

Discussion

As I examined the impetus to create these academies, which inevitably shaped the nature of instructional leadership at each school where decisions were made, something became apparent. The catalyst in one setting was mandated at the central office (central decision making), while the educators at the other school attempted to be proactive once they identified a potential problem affecting the school (site-based decision making). Policymakers at each school decided to create these ninth grade academies; however, there were two different driving forces. At Alpha Academy, the instructional leader commented that high failure rates and an excessive number of referrals of ninth grade students prompted the decision. At Special K Academy, this reform was precipitated due to the high number of students dropping out of school at the ninth grade. Once in Alpha Academy was in place, Robinson asserted that it was his goal to make it a “buffer zone to

alleviate the stress many ninth graders had about attending high school while at the same time they still experienced the rigors of high school.”

Although current research was available that identified best practices when implementing ninth grade academies, every situation was different, and there were various approaches about the best implementation of this SLC concept. For example, the model of transitioning was a best practice that received an enormous amount of attention when it came to ninth grade academies. Both instructional leaders, Robinson and Exemplary Eva, concurred on the importance of appropriately transitioning freshmen into their academies. There, however, was a distinct contrast in how the students were transitioned, the length of the transition process, and even the content of the transition program at each academy. The composition of these SLC’s was a topic that was also analyzed. While developing and sustaining communication between schools and parents of children at the ninth grade academies was important to both participants, once again, different approaches were utilized at these academies. As a result, there was no definite blueprint for installing specific best practices, procedures, and/or policies that worked for every ninth grade academy. To this end, the two instructional leaders agreed that their success was based on the following factors: (1) parental involvement, (2) common planning time for teacher, (3) the creation of these small learning academies, and (4) transition programs.

Chapter Summary

This chapter opened with a highlight of the research purpose, 1 over arching research question, four sub questions and was followed by a detailed narrative account of the research participants and sites. An explanation of the theoretical framework and how

it shaped the inquiry was given. The data collection methods employed were instrumental in producing a vast amount of information, and I explained how the data retrieved were processed. Finally, after a thorough data analysis, four themes emerged: collective experiences as opposed to a monolithic experience, site-based decision making opposite a centralized decision-making environment, the seclusion concept versus a school-within-a-school model, and finally being an introverted rather than being an extroverted leader.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

My interest in ninth grade academies and the possibility that these academies can positively impact the “ninth grade bulge” was the force that drove me to look more deeply into the topic of the current study. It was my contention that a thorough examination of the lived experiences of two instructional leaders at ninth grade academies and the processes and procedures that they implemented at their schools as a solution to the growing phenomena of ninth grade drop-outs would contribute to the existing body literature on this topic.

Chapter 1 highlighted the main problem: the high number of students dropping out of school at the ninth grade. According to Chutes (1999), the drop-out rate in this country is in the mid-20s. This picture became more dismal when the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) indicated that annually, 7,000 students quit school each day in this country. In Chapter 2, there was a detailed explanation of the existing research illuminating this impending drop-out crisis, a discussion of high school reforms employed to remedy this problem, a historical context of the ninth grade academy, and justification for the creation of ninth grade academies. In Chapter 3, the methodology, including data collection and analysis methods, was discussed. Data were collected using three methods, i.e., interviews, observation, and a focus group session, which yielded the findings discussed in Chapter 4. During data analysis, four themes resonated from the data collected: (1) monolithic and collective experiences, (2) site-based and centralized decision making, (3) seclusion and school-within-a-school, and (4) introverted and extroverted leadership.

In this chapter, the study findings were compared with the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. Emphasis was given to the implications of the lived experiences of future instructional leaders who were eager to implement any of the strategies, processes, and/or procedures outlined in this dissertation. Although there was information available that identified best practices to utilize in ninth grade academies, the fact that every situation was different meant that there were various approaches to best implementing this small learning community (SLC) concept. For example, the model of “transitioning” was a best practice that received an enormous amount of attention, as discussed by Mizelle (1999) and Morgan and Hertzog (1999). The composition of these SLCs has been analyzed thoroughly by David (2008). While the strategy of how to develop and sustain communication between schools and parents of children at ninth grade academies was discussed by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006). As a result, of these things there was no definite blueprint for installing specific best practices, procedures, and/or policies that worked best in a ninth grade academy. To this end, the participants in this study agreed in regard to the importance of parental involvement, common planning time for teachers, the creation of these small learning academies, and transition programs however, the implementation differed at each location.

Summary of Findings Addressing Each Research Question

Monolithic experiences versus collective experiences. The first theme identified in this study referred to the lived experiences of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies and how these leaders attempted to make meanings of these events. The existing literature does not address the lived experiences of these instructional leaders or their ability to comprehend these phenomena. The first theme in this study was

monolithic as opposed to *collective* experiences, which resonated from data collected to answer the first research question; this theme derived from the lived experiences which contributed to the selected participants becoming instructional leaders. An analysis of the experiences molding the participants' careers as instructional leaders at ninth grade academies was a part of this theme. Once these experiences were revealed, I probed participants to better comprehend their meanings and determine the ways participants and their academies were impacted by these meanings.

The *monolithic experience* theme was used to describe Robinson's situation at Alpha Academy since he said that one individual significantly impacted his decision to become an instructional leader. The impression created by this sole individual on Robinson's life was so tremendous that the experience positively shaped his career; in contrast, Exemplary Eva's life was polar opposite. The *collective experience* theme best conveyed the fact that the lived experiences propelling Exemplary Eva's career as an instructional leader came from multiple sources.

No empirical research was found in reference to the lived experiences of instructional leaders prior to or after they became leaders of a ninth grade academy. This study is significant to the field of Educational Leadership because it will fill that void. It also accounts for these instructional leaders' rationale for leading ninth grade academies. Furthermore, it focuses on these leaders' underlying motives for implementing the processes, procedures, and best practices necessary to address the drop-out problem plaguing their districts. The two instructional leaders that participated in the current study contended that their experiences at these ninth grade academies were a combination of relationship-building; long, tedious hours of work; many days of isolation; being

nurturers; and also having to deal with the challenges that were specific to this age group of students.

Study participants asserted that working as school leaders at these ninth grade academies was not just a job—it was a calling. Both participants affirmed that lived experiences from early in their lives set them on their paths as educators. Exemplary Eva highlighted the collaborative lived experiences of many individuals combined that made her the instructional leader she became. Specifically, she stated that: “[these were] excellent mentoring experiences . . . everything about them impressed me. . . I incorporated pieces of their personalities into the [instructional leader] that I became.” Robinson cited being positively influenced by a male role model who was an educator as the significant event that helped him realized that he was destined to become an instructional leader. Robinson’s desire to replicate this feeling in the lives of others was how he made meaning of these experiences. This study illustrated how the lived experiences of younger Eddie Robinson—who felt loved, cared for and was taught to believe in himself—led him to become an instructional leader with the goal to create the same climate at Alpha Academy. This was captured when Robinson claimed, “I wanted to create an environment at Alpha Academy that I experienced when I was in high school. I wanted students to feel they were cared for the way Coach Mac made us feel many years ago.”

Nature of instructional leadership: Site-based decision making versus centralized decision making. In the second research question, I analyzed the nature of instructional leadership within a ninth grade academy through a social constructivist point of view. According to the proponents of this theoretical construct, study participants

made meaning of their lived experiences as instructional leaders at ninth grade academies through their environment, past occurrences, and their responses to these events. As a result, the nature of instructional leadership at these academies has been shaped by their experiences, environment, and social context.

Specifically, this question focused on the impetus driving study participants to create ninth grade academies at each research site. The second layer of this question was best understood when analyzing it from a social constructivist lens, in which the question was asked, “What experiences and factors were present in the existing environment that necessitated the existence of ninth grade academies?” Finally, this question illuminated the rationale at each site for constructing the respective academy. The theme for this section answered the research question by indicating that at Special K Academy, the ninth grade academy was developed through a centralized decision-making process, while at Alpha Academy, this initiative was produced as a result of the site-based decision-making continuum.

Previous studies have highlighted the fact that ninth grade academies have been utilized to remedy the drop-out epidemic in America’s public education system. Morgan and Hertzog (1999) revealed that ninth grade academies have been utilized by many school districts as a method to reduce the drop-out problem and increase ninth grade promotion rates. This problem was captured best by Rourke (2001), who avowed that the use of the ninth grade academy resulted from the large number of students nationally who failed this grade each year.

This study emphasizes the fact that ninth grade academies were established as a method to off-set the challenge of freshmen dropping out of school. In addition, the role

of instructional leadership at the ninth grade academy was also evaluated. The idea to develop a ninth grade academy at both research sites was consistent with the research available from previous findings that these small learning communities (SLCs) were born from the high numbers of student failure and drop-out. Robinson concluded that “after examining ninth graders’ [experiences] and their high failure rate,” the decision was made to implement ninth grade academies. This same theme resonated at Special K Academy when Exemplary Eva indicated that “the research . . . revealed that failure and drop-out rates for [freshmen] were significantly higher . . . so the decision was made to launch an academy.”

The current study’s distinction rested in the fact that it crystallized where the decision was made to fight the drop-out problem. One thing addressed by the current study that was not discussed in other studies was an analysis of where the motivation for this intervention originated. I sought to determine if these instructional leaders were influential in the creation of the freshmen academies at their schools. I also wanted to discover where the decision was made to implement these SLCs and the impact that these academies had on the current operation of the school.

At Special K Academy, it was a top-down process. A few leaders at the central office developed an initiative to attack ninth grade drop-out rates. While Exemplary Eva did not play a substantial role in this decision, she was a catalyst at the site and was indeed involved in the implementation of this SLC; however, the opposite was true at Alpha Academy. The decision to create a ninth grade academy at Alpha Academy resulted more so from recommendations from the professional staff and experts at the school. These leaders affirmed that the job of an instructional leader required one to be a

multi-tasker who created the climate in the building, set expectations for all stakeholders, and ultimately was responsible for developing students who succeed academically.

Best practices, policies, and/or procedures implemented: Seclusion versus school-within-a-school. The themes of “seclusion” and “school-within-a-school” for the third research question derived from practices that were being implemented at both academies that were grounded in the research and were essential if the SLC was going to flourish. Even though the supposed experts did not agree on the “best” practice, the instructional leaders that participated in this study explained why a particular strategy was better for their academy. Finally, this section was inclusive of various instructional ideas (similar and different) that these instructional leaders employed.

Many of the best practices, policies, and procedures that mentioned by proponents of ninth grade academies were implemented by the instructional leader in this study. For instance, Raywid (1996) asserted that these SLCs have one person who was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the academy. Robinson mentioned that he was accountable for the evaluation and supervision of all teachers and staff in his building, while Eva indicated that she made it a point to observe by monitoring the school’s halls daily. As mentioned in some instances, these instructional leaders employed the same concept at their academies; however, the difference occurred in the implementation, which was dictated by situations.

One of the most important strategies to address when discussing ninth grade academies is their transition to high school. Although research suggested an optimal approach to this concept, the instructional leaders in this study had to adjust this idea to accommodate their situation. Reents (2002) adamantly stated that freshmen transition

programs be thorough, and last at least one school year. Smith (2007) also supported this idea, asserting that if ninth grade students were to be successful, they be involved in a transition program that was a year-long and inclusive of all stakeholders. The transition concept was an induction program in which freshmen were indoctrinated to all the intricacies at their high schools. While the transition concept was very important to both instructional leaders, Alpha Academy handled this with a 7 1/2-hour orientation called “Destination Graduation Day,” designed for all incoming ninth graders. Special K Academy had a three-week process in the summer before freshmen started high school, which they called “The Bridge Program.”

Another ideology receiving a significant amount of attention was the composition of freshmen academies. Because there was no definite position on the best configuration for establishing an academy, many of these institutions were designed to best fit the needs of the particular school. Chmelynski (2004) mentioned that freshman academies were developed to keep ninth graders from being lost in the large student bodies at high schools. The best practice utilized at Alpha Academy was to house their students in a building that was separate from other students on the campus, while the approach at Special K Academy was to seclude their freshman on a certain wing of their building. There was no empirical data that advocated which technique was better. Finally, a more compelling aspect of ninth grade academies was the manner in which teachers’ planning time was allocated.

According to Reents (2002), this strategy was essential to facilitate academic support for freshmen. Oxley (2005) also ascertained that it was imperative that these academies utilized teacher teaming and common planning periods by teachers to provide

strong academic support for students. The current study highlighted how these intervention strategies were employed by the participating instructional leaders to resolve the drop-out dilemma. At Alpha Academy, this support manifested through their use of an “Advisory Period.” Robinson stated that teachers used this time period to help struggling students by providing them an opportunity for enrichment, remediation, and tutoring. The same philosophy was devised at Special K Academy in the form of their “Advisory Program.” Exemplary Eva and her staff utilized this hour-long weekly session to provide instructional support to students who were academically deficient. At both academies, the time was used to develop strategies to help struggling students as well as to solicit parental presence at the school. Other creative methods used by instructional leaders included gender specific classes, the Zeroes Are Not Accepted Do the Work (ZANDO) program at Alpha Academy, and the character education classes at Special K Academy.

To maintain students’ interest in school, study participants devised processes and procedures to motivate the students attending their particular academies. These initiatives were connected with incentives, in which these leaders were able to solicit contributions from corporate and civic entities. Such processes and procedures were discussed by Lampert (2005), who advocated involving all stakeholders in students’ academic achievement at ninth grade academies. Students at Alpha Academy who earned on the honor roll or achieved perfect attendance during a specific marking period received gift certificates that were donated by local vendors; this certificate was secured by the instructional leader. A process conceived by the staff at Special K Academy consisted of highlighting their student and/or athlete of the week for stellar performances via public

address announcements or posting the student's accomplishments in the corridor of the school entrance.

Leadership Attributes that you Possess: Introverted vs. Extroverted Leader

The theme that emerged for the fourth research question was “introverted” versus “extroverted” leadership. Participants in the current study described themselves and the traits that facilitated the inclusion of stakeholders at their academies. Although these words are antonyms, the leadership traits that these instructional leaders possessed were similar; however, each participant employed these characteristics differently. One instructional leader was quiet and reserved, while the other was outgoing and loquacious. Moreover, the skills in their leadership toolbox were used in such a manner that both were successful at their academies.

There was no empirical data available that delineated the leadership attributes most beneficial in incorporating stakeholders in the implementation of ninth grade academies. However, previous research has, in fact, reported the positive benefits of incorporating stakeholders in public schools in traditional high school settings. This point was poignantly stated by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), who said that the exclusion of parental involvement in the schooling of ninth graders increased the likelihood that they would drop-out within two years of entering high school. Ivey (2002) stated that when parents were involved in their children's schooling, students had better academic and behavior reports. This philosophical construct was a consistent theme at both academies, and the participating instructional leaders employed numerous initiatives to facilitate these occurrences on their campuses.

This study was further noteworthy because it clarified the intentional design employed by these instructional leaders to gather support from teachers and develop opportunities to keep students actively engaged and parental presence at each research site. Both instructional leaders ascertained that building positive relationships and developing open and honest communication were vital in establishing a nurturing rapport with stakeholders. Coupled with these attributes, study participants commented that being visible and supportive was also essential in developing an inclusive team. These ideological concepts were founded in the available research. Numerous methods to keep students engaged and parents involved at their schools were discussed by study participants. Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) were adamant in their assertion that the development of ninth grade academies, which consistently provided opportunities for students to participate in positive activities at school, resulted in higher student promotion rates.

Related literature on ninth grade academies has failed to concentrate on any aspect of instructional leadership. This study connected the void between the existing work that was done on ninth grade academies and the vacuum which existed regarding instructional leadership at these schools. It highlighted the research-based concepts utilized by instructional leaders to involve all stakeholders in the lifeline of their academies.

Relevance to the Current Literature

In response to the purpose of this qualitative study to examine the lived experiences of two instructional leaders, identify any best practices implemented that facilitated students' successful matriculation and to examine the processes and

procedures that were implemented to remedy the growing epidemic of freshman dropping out of school. I was able to extract from the data the fact that ninth grade academies were developed to curtail the drop-out phenomenon but the with no exact definition of how these small learning communities should be put into operation. Robinson's lived experience of attending a high school that was nurturing, supportive, and conducive to learning shaped his philosophical perspective as an instructional leader. This is apparent when his comments were examined regarding the climate at Alpha Academy, he said, "I wanted to create an environment at Alpha Academy that I experienced when I was in high school. I wanted students to feel like they were cared for the way Coach Mac made us feel many years ago."

As stated in chapter 2, the shift in support of the implementation of ninth grade academies was an attempt to answer the rising drop-out problem nationally at this grade level (Rouke, 2001). The available research supports the fact that there are several different approaches available to implement ninth grade academy as a reform model. What I ascertained from conducting this case study was that these instructional leaders concurred with the existing literature however; each contended that their implementation was absolutely the best approach. Both instructional leaders agreed that the ninth grade academy reform model was instrumental in improving the promoting rate at their respective school. The biggest difference can be found in the application of this strategy. The existing literature supported the contention that ninth graders were academically more successful in smaller settings (Raywid, 1996). These instructional leaders championed this research strategy and were vital in establishing this reform model around this concept. Similarly I found that seclusion of ninth graders was another principle

espoused by advocates of this movement. This was a concept that shaped each academy. Chmelynski (2004) mentioned that ninth grade academies be utilized to improve freshmen promotion rate which could be achieved through segregating them totally or partially. The difference again was observed in the execution of this idea. At Alpha Academy ninth graders were totally secluded but at Special K they were housed in a separate wing. While the distinctions were glaring I learned that separation from upper-class students was essential regardless if it was total or partial isolation for the freshmen.

Since there is no research available to refute either of these positions, I asserted that the employment of this concept is situational at best however it is absolutely the most effective approach accessible to resolve the drop-out dilemma at the ninth grade. What I learned from my research pertaining to the ninth grade academy model being used to resolve the drop-out problem was regardless of how the concept was implemented; it is an effective strategy to facilitate freshmen successful navigation of this grade level.

Recommendation for Future Research

Although there was some literature on ninth grade academies, I was unable to find any studies pertaining directly to best practices, procedures, and/or processes of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies. This researcher recommended that future research ideas centered on topics pertaining to instructional leadership at ninth grade academies be conducted. The purpose of the current qualitative study was to investigate the performance of instructional leaders at ninth grade academies to determine if any best practices, processes, and/or procedures were implemented that contributed to students' successful matriculation through their freshman year of school. I also sought to understand how the ninth grade academy concept was utilized to resolve the freshman

drop-out crisis. Further attention should be given to the impact of parental involvement at ninth grade academies and the ways it could mitigate efforts to reduce student drop-out at this grade level. Such studies would be important because it is believed that students perform better academically and behaviorally when their parents were active at their schools.

Additional study could focus specifically on strategies that instructional leaders have implemented at ninth grade academies that have had a significant impact on improving student achievement. While there was existing literature that addressed the need for transition programs, common planning, and the physical composition of the ninth grade academy, future research should examine (1) the prerequisite skill-sets that instructional leaders should possess or at least be familiar with, (2) the possibility of standardizing the strategies for implementing a ninth grade academy, and (3) identifying strategies that were most effective in reducing the number of students dropping out of school in ninth grade.

Conclusion

In the current study, I analyzed the instructional leadership at two ninth grade academies with a baseline question of, “What are the experiences of two instructional leaders in implementing a ninth grade academy?” This inquiry did not reveal a specific set of principles contributing to the success of a ninth grade academy. Data analysis indicated that more attention be given to the levels of success that students at ninth grade academies experience when their parent(s) were actively involved in their education as compared to those whose parents were not. Many of the procedures, practices, and

strategies implemented at these academies were supported by existing literature although the implementation of these concepts varied.

This qualitative collective case study thoroughly scrutinized the lived exercises of two instructional leaders at ninth grade academies and the best practices implemented to curtail the large numbers of students dropping out of school in ninth grade. The current study also sought to confirm processes and procedures utilized to serve this same end. A social constructivism perspective framed this study; this philosophical construct professed that (1) these instructional leaders made meaning of their worlds through their experiences and (2) often the realities of their worlds were multiple. In other words, these two instructional leaders understood their worlds from the social context in which they lived. The literature established a historical point of reference of the drop-out problem in the American public education system. It also depicted the manner in which ninth grade academies work to address this crisis. Finally, the literature conveyed the conceptual framework of small learning communities, the composition of these communities, and the way ninth grade academies evolved from this ideology. In order to collect the data for this project, I obtained the support of two instructional leaders from two different ninth grade academies. They volunteered to participate in three interviews, two observations in their working environment, one focused study group and several follow up emails to answer questions that surfaced after our time together.

This research study was concluded with chapter five. The themes that resulted from the current study were: (1) monolithic and collective experiences, (2) site-based decision making and centralized decision making, (3) seclusion and school-within-a-school, and (d) introverted and extroverted leadership. While the themes utilized to

answer each research question differed according to each instructional leader and academy, the conclusion was that each instructional leader implemented numerous best practices, procedures, and processes at their school to remedy the drop-out problem. While in some respect the same concepts were employed, oftentimes there were some variations in the implementation at each location.

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Appendix A

Subject Consent Form for Participation of Human Subject in Research

Project Title: A Case Study that Examines the Instructional Leadership at Ninth Grade Academies.

Researcher: Alvin E. Harris, Jr.

My name is Alvin Harris, and I am an Ed D student at The University of Memphis. In fulfillment of the requirements for the doctorate degree in Educational Leadership for LEAD 9000-Dissertation, I am seeking your participation in this research project. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two observations of you at your work site, three ninety minutes interviews and one ninety-minute focus study group. Each session will be recorded. Six months after this project is completed all the recordings will be destroyed.

This project has been approved through the University of Memphis. That basically means that you will not be harmed in any way by participating in this group. Your identity will not be revealed. Your name will not appear on any reports that are written about this research.

At any point and for any reason (even after you have signed this form), you are free to withdraw from participating in this study without any penalty, questioning, or coercion. If you have any questions regarding the research subjects' rights please contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (901) 678-2533.

Authorization:

I have read the above, understand the nature of this study, and agree to participate. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this study I have not waived any legal or human rights. I also understand that I have the **right to refuse to participate** and that **my right to withdraw from participation at any time** during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice. If I have any concerns regarding my selection for this study or my treatment during this study, I may contact:

Alvin E. Harris
(901) 690-7112
aeharris@memphis.edu or alvinharris506@hotmail.com

Appendix B

Request to Conduct Research

Director of Middle and Secondary Education

TO: Alvin Harris,
FROM: Director of Middle and High School Education
DATE: December 17, 2010
RE: Request to Conduct Research

I am pleased to inform you that your research project, *Examining the Role of the Instructional Leadership at a Ninth Grade Academy* **is approved** based on meeting the following requirements:

- FERPA rights have been guaranteed.
- Answers to questions 9 and 10 have been guaranteed.
- There can be no identification of students in any way.
- There is no monetary exchange or gifts.
- There must be written evidence that each parent approves each student's participation.

Upon completion of your research, please send a copy of your final report to
Director of Middle and Secondary School Education .

Sincerely,

Middle & Secondary Director

cc: Dr. Reginald Green

Appendix C

Observation Protocol

Time of the observation:
Length of the observation:
Date:
Place:

Observer:

Individual being observed:

Position of the Interviewee:

Field notes from research observations

Time	Description of Events	Reflective notes of Descriptions

Appendix D

Cover Letter Requesting Research Subjects to Participate

You are being asked to participate in a case study conducted by Alvin E. Harris, Jr. from the University of Memphis. This is a collective case study at multiple sites that explores the role of Instructional leaders at ninth grade academies. The researcher wanted to discover any best practices that were implemented by these Instructional leaders at their academies that helped facilitate students' successful matriculation of this grade level. This study also sought to examine the processes and procedures that were implemented to remedy the growing epidemic of freshman dropping out of school.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two observations of you at your work site, three ninety minutes interviews and one ninety-minute focus study group. Each session will be recorded and destroyed six months after the completion of the dissertation. Your participation in this research will remain anonymous at all times. You will be provided a pseudonym throughout this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you decide to participate, you can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind. If you have any questions regarding the research subjects' rights please contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Memphis at (901) 678-2533.

I have read this cover letter and understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. All questions that I have regarding my participation in this research project have been answered satisfactory. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Appendix E

Guiding Questions

The baseline question that guided this inquiry project was: What are the experiences of two Instructional leaders in implementing a ninth grade academy? This research was crafted to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of Instructional leadership at ninth grade academies and how do these leaders make meaning of these experiences?
2. What is the nature of Instructional leadership at ninth grade academies?
3. What best practices, policies and procedures did you (the Instructional leader) implement at your ninth grade academy that impacted the small learning community model?
4. Describe the leadership attributes which you possess that are instrumental in incorporating all stakeholders in the implementation of the ninth grade academy. What was the response of different stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, and teacher teams) to this implementation?

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Time of the interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of the Interviewee:

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to conduct a collective case study at multiple sites that examines the role of Instructional leaders at a ninth grade academy.

Interview Questions

See the attached documents

(Thank the individual for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of their confidentiality during this process and remind them about the next interview).

Appendix G

Interview 1

(Developing an understanding of the participant's life history-Seidman)

1. Discuss any jobs that you had prior to becoming an Assistant Principal.
2. How long were you a classroom teacher?
3. How did you get into education? Why?
4. Discuss the educator who impacted your life the most. How did they? Were they significant in your decision in becoming an educator?
5. Describe the relevant events in your life that you feel have contributed to you being the Instructional leader at a ninth grade academy.
6. Explain how you got into administration.
7. How long have you been an Instructional leader?
8. How long have you been employed in your current school district?
9. Tell me your story as an Instructional leader at a ninth grade academy.
10. How long have you been an Instructional leader in this ninth grade academy?
11. Explain how you managed to get the duty of being the person responsible for ninth grade academy.
12. How long has your school had an academy?
13. Discuss your school's rationale for creating an academy.
14. Discuss your life experiences that have prepared you for being an Instructional leader at a ninth grade academy.

Appendix H

Interview 2

(Understanding the specific details of the job of an Assistant Principal at a Ninth Grade Academy-Seidman)

1. Describe your job as an Instructional leader in a Ninth Grade Academy.
2. Paint the picture of a typical day from 6:45 a.m. until 2:45 p.m. at a Ninth Grade Academy.
3. Discuss any methods that your academy has developed in an effort to better involve parents at your school.
4. Describe any intervention strategies in place to assist ninth graders who are struggling academically at your school.
5. List some things that the academy has done to challenge students to achieve academically; and to get parents involved at your school.
6. Describe your relationship or interaction with students in the academy. How do you personally interact with the different types of students at your school?
7. In as much detail as possible, describe what it is like being an Instructional leader at a Ninth Grade Academy.
8. Explain the purpose of a Ninth Grade Academy?
9. What best practices and/or teaching strategies have your school implementing that is directly attributing to students achieving academically? Students attending school regularly? Students becoming engaged with the school?
10. At your Ninth Grade Academy what are some practices that have been implemented which are not working? Why?
11. After being in the academy for _____ years were there any obvious changes or growth that you saw in the children? Were there any areas of growth or changes that could be implemented that would have made the Academy more effective?

Appendix I

Interview 3

(Understanding the specific details of the job of an Assistant Principal at a Ninth Grade Academy-Seidman)

Interview three will be a follow of the first two interviews. Any question, concept, or theme, that was not thoroughly answered or that I would like to investigate in more detail will be addressed during this interview.